# PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST AS A MOTHER: FEMINIST RECONFIGURATIONS OF THE MATERNAL IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN LITERATURE

KRISTINA GETZ

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

YORK UNIVERSITY

TORONTO, ONTARIO

January 2022

## Abstract

Since the advent of second-wave feminism, Canadian women writers have grappled with the multitude of personal and creative conflicts that emerge when they attempt to mother their children with the attention and intensity they desire, while simultaneously actualizing themselves creatively. My dissertation explores this paradoxical nexus of (pro)creativity through shifting lenses of impossibility, possibility, corporeality and subjectivity. The chapters that follow illuminate the modern and contemporary emergence of the mother-artist as a powerful creative presence in Canadian literature by women, a literary motif which evolves alongside and is informed by feminist theory. Furthermore, discourses of the mother-artist enact a feminist transformation of the mother from the traditionally silenced maternal figure of psychoanalytic paradigms to an empowered, active and creative agent in her own right. The mother-artist ultimately explodes the limitations of motherhood by insisting on artistic and creative space for her experiences of mothering, and likewise refuses Romantic and essentially masculinist notions of the artist as solitary, isolated and autonomous. Instead, the figure of the mother-artist reveals herself to be interrelated and intertwined with both her art and her children. In order to capture the breadth of cultural and literary discourse around feminism, maternity and artistry, the following chapters address fiction and poetry that feature a mother-artist as their central protagonist and capture the nexus of maternity and creativity. In exploring this intersection of motherhood and artistry, my analysis draws attention to both form and content, highlighting the similar ways in which the mother-artist is articulated in poetry and fictional narrative representation. The thematic continuity of the mother-artist throughout allows for a cohesive consideration of a variety of formal and generic expressions which capture texts across seventy years of Canadian literature, from the 1940s into the present. I conclude that while the myth of the impossibility of the mother-artist persists discursively and thematically, the mother-artist is ultimately a figure of radical potentiality and possibility. Rather than functioning as a hindrance to her work, the mother-artist's reproductivity adds richness and nuance to her life and, most importantly, to her literary creations.

For my daughter, Zoe

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my supervisor Dr. Susan Warwick, whose mentorship, insight, guidance, kindness and compassion shepherded me through all the stages of my PhD. Thank you also to Dr. Stephen Cain, whose Modern Canadian Poetry course reintroduced me to the work of Dorothy Livesay, which formed the germinative beginnings of my dissertation, and whose incisive and thoughtful feedback helped shape this project. And enormous thanks to Dr. Andrea O'Reilly, for her rigorous theoretical suggestions, for introducing me to a community of academic mothers, and for her inspiring, pioneering scholarship in motherhood studies. Finally, I want to acknowledge the contribution of my friend and classmate, Dr. Aaron Kreuter, who helped me formulate the title in our Dissertation Proposal Workshop in the spring of 2016.

My most heartfelt gratitude to my best friend, Urania Agas, who has been my ride-or-die since we were fourteen. Your friendship is so intricately woven into my life and sense of self that I wouldn't recognize myself without you. Thank you for everything. To my other bestie, Anna Cristino, thank you for your boundless loyalty and support, for always listening to my incessant blabbing, and for your non-stop hilarity. And a thank you that goes beyond words for having been there—literally and figuratively—to catch me after I lost my Dad. To Dr. Zuzanna Mazurek—look! We're both doctors now! (Even though you're a real one). Thank you for what is now half-a-lifetime of the deepest friendship, conversation and mutual self-recognition, even with the Atlantic Ocean between us for the past thirteen years. You have always pushed me to be my best self, and never stopped reminding me of my potential and my self-worth. To my friends and classmates Dr. Eric Schmaltz and Dr. Aaron Kreuter, thank you for your friendship and camaraderie over all the years of our PhDs (and beyond). My admiration for you both—as scholars, writers, and simply as human beings—continues to inspire me. And to Nasra Smith, fellow mother-grad-student in the trenches, thank you for your exemplary strength, love and resilience; you're amazing.

For my father, David Getz, who died of cancer in 2017, and never got to see me finish my PhD. Your fierce courage, your sense of humour and your gentle grace will never leave me. Accompanying you in your final months, weeks and days of illness taught me simultaneously about both the painful brevity and the transcendent beauty of life. Losing you was the worst thing that has ever happened to me, but having had you as my father was among life's greatest

gifts. You always believed in me, and always made me feel cherished. Wherever you are now, I hope I have made you proud.

To my own mother, Maria Mironowicz, whose boundless maternal love, strength and bravery have made me the woman I am today. Your ambition, fearlessness and boldness set the finest of examples and taught me to reach for the stars. Thank you for always believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. Thank you, also, for taking such extraordinary care of Zoe, for loving her so much, for nurturing her, for the countless hours of babysitting which allowed me the freedom and space to read and think and research and write.

To my husband, Fabrizzio Massari. I did it! I *finally* finished it! Thank you for carrying the financial burden of our lives for so many years, for working so hard to support our family while I chased this impractical dream. Thank you for more than twenty years of adventure, travel, passion and laughter, for sticking it out through the hard times, for being my rock, for loving me, for our incredible little girl. I love you, babe.

And finally, to my amazing daughter, Zoe Massari. This is for you. Thank you for making me a mother. You have grown up with a Mama who—for as long as you can remember—has been working on her PhD. I hope you can forgive me for the times I was distracted, preoccupied and frustrated, and instead, see in me all of the potentialities of the life that is ahead of you. I hope that I have proven that no dream is too big or too impossible to achieve. It is the greatest privilege of my life to help you grow up into such a fiercely intelligent, compassionate, beautiful, imaginative, and curious young woman. I am so proud to be your Mama. I love you with all my heart.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# Introduction

## Portraits of the Artist as Mother: Feminist Reconfigurations of the Maternal in Modern and Contemporary Canadian Literature

"What does it mean to write as a mother?" Scholar Joanne S. Frye originally posed this question in 1997 at a conference of the Association for Research on Mothering (Frye 187). More than a decade later, Frye returns to this question amidst "an explosion of books by mothers… as we continue to struggle with the meanings of maternal subjectivity and the difficulties of portraying it" (187). The enigma that is the mother-writer stems in part from her rarity (until recent decades, that is) and more persistently, from the perceived and material difficulties of combining motherhood with an artistic life. Frye cites seven reasons for what she describes as "the dearth of mother-writers," including the material demands of motherhood (time, energy, frequent interruption), the conceptual conflict between the activities of "writing" and "mothering," the objectification and silencing of mothers (largely via psychoanalytical traditions), the cultural perception that mothers and motherhood are fundamentally uninteresting, the difficulty of articulating maternal subjectivity in any honest or authentic way, "the tension between *self* and selflessness," and finally, the lack of a tradition of maternal writing to which aspiring mother-writers might turn for inspiration or succor (189). And Frye is certainly correct when she writes, in 2010, that "[m]ost of these problems persist, even in the first decade of the twenty-first century" (189).

As a singular but prominent example, Sheila Heti's 2018 autofictional text, *Motherhood*, meditates and ruminates on the particular and enduring conflicts between art and motherhood, as she wonders whether or not she should have a baby. In her late thirties with a successful and well-established literary career, Heti's auto-narrator has never felt a clear and persistent desire

for a child, but worries that in foregoing maternity, she is missing out on one of life's most fundamental of experiences. In trying to arrive at a decision, she asks a series of rhetorical questions that are answered by the flipping of three coins, a technique derived—according to the book's forenote—from the ancient Chinese divination system of the *I Ching*. Heti's narrator asks,

> can a woman who makes books be let off the hook by the universe for not making the living thing we call babies?
>
> *yes*
>
> Oh good! I feel so guilty about it sometimes, thinking it's what I *should* do, because I always think that animals are happiest when they live out their instincts. Maybe not happiest, but feel most alive. Yet making art makes me feel alive, and taking care of others doesn't make me feel as alive. Maybe I have to think about myself less as a woman with this woman's special task, and more as an individual with her own special task—not put *woman* before my individuality. (24-25)

Heti captures both the conflict and the conflation of literary creation and procreation, a discursive paradox that has recurred in literature throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. While "making books" and "making the living thing we call babies" are set in compensatory opposition to one another, the narrator confesses her sense of guilt for her unwillingness to follow her biological dictates towards reproduction. A few pages later, Heti's narrator recounts a conversation she has had with her partner, Miles, the potential father to her as-yet-undecided-upon child, and the implications a child may have on her artistic life:

> Yesterday, Miles and I had a long conversation about women artists having children. He said many things about why it was so made up, the joys of parenting, and that really it's

> like tilling the field. And why should people with other work to do also till the field?... He went on to say what a lot of time it was, and that it sort of blows your load, parenting, because it's the perfect job—it's very hard but only *you* can do it. *And isn't making art like that?* he asked. If you can get that existential satisfaction from parenthood, would you feel as much desire to make art? He said that one can either be a great artist and a mediocre parent, or the reverse, but not great at both, because both art and parenthood take all of one's time and attention. (35)

Miles articulates the pernicious and still-prevalent assumption that art and children do not mix. That this perspective is delivered by the text's main male character is even more incisive, as it derives from essentialist, masculine conceptions of the artist as autonomous, Romantic genius. As Grace Stewart explains of these foundational assumptions "one tradition of the male artist is experiential, a seeking of personal fulfillment; the other… is reflective, aloof, a self-centred and solitary existence" (*A New Mythos* 14). And yet, not only does Heti's narrator's nagging reproductive desire persist, but procreation and literary creation are themselves frequently and repeatedly fused:

> How assaulted I feel when I hear that a person has had three, four, five, more [children]… It feels greedy, overbearing and rude—an arrogant spreading of those selves. Yet perhaps I am not so different from such people—spreading myself over so many pages, with my dream of my pages spreading over the world. My religious cousin, who is the same age as I am, she has six kids. And I have six books. Maybe there is no great difference between us, just the slightest difference in our faith—in what parts of ourselves we feel called to spread. (84-85)

Heti's contemporary autofiction captures the most persistent and enduring conceptions of both the nature of motherhood and the nature of art; that each are all-consuming, that they are intimately interrelated, and yet paradoxically, that one must inevitably preclude and diminish the other, and that perhaps combining the two is an exercise in futile impossibilities. In fact, Heti's text is simply the most recent in a complicated Canadian literary tradition that has grappled with the paradoxes and possibilities of the mother-artist, and the myriad ways in which motherhood frustrates, complicates, inflects, inspires and generates literary creativity.

Mother-writers have been an enduring feature of the canon of Canadian literature since its formal inception in the nineteenth-century. Notwithstanding the relative paucity of women writers with children in the early decades of Canadian literature (and in early Western literature more generally, as Frye notes and as I will explore further below), there were still some notable early writers such as Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill and L.M. Montgomery who were also mothers. However, it is not until the post-World War Two era that Canadian women writers begin to explore in explicit and implicit forms the limitations that motherhood imposes on their art and ambition. As I explore in detail in Chapter One, Dorothy Livesay's 1953 poem, "The Three Emilys," questions how her role as mother interferes with her literary vision and practice in contrast to the childless freedom she imagines for her heroines Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, and Emily Carr.[1] Fifty-three years later, poet Su Croll reveals in her 2008 poem

---

[1] Livesay writes,

> I move as mother in a frame,
> My arteries
> Flow the immemorial way
> Towards the child, the man;
> And only for brief span
> Am I an Emily on mountain snows. (*CP* 202).

Contemporaneously, Anne Wilkinson writes in her 1955 poem, "Lens":

> My woman's eye is weak
> And veiled with milk;
> My working eye is muscled

"writing mother," that these preoccupations—as evidenced also by Heti's 2018 *Motherhood*—remain fiercely salient and problematic.[2] Into the 1970s, which are widely considered to be the years where Canadian literature firmly established itself as a unique discipline in academic circles and in the cultural life of the nation, the most celebrated and canonical women writers were having children while simultaneously establishing their undeniably successful literary careers, such as Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Carol Shields, and Audrey Thomas. As such, it can be argued that motherhood forms an integral—if heretofore silent—part of the Canadian literary tradition.

My dissertation inserts itself into the nexus of the often paradoxical and contentious figure of the mother-artist in modern and contemporary Canadian literature, capturing the confluence of women's literary creativity, feminism, and motherhood. Through an elucidation of Canadian fiction and poetry that takes as its principal subject the mother-artist, I demonstrate that within the canon of the nation's literature is a matrilineage of feminist mother-writers who resist both masculinist conceptions of the artist and patriarchal silencing of the maternal.[3] While many

---

Stretched and open. (*Heresies* 82)

[2] Croll writes,

> I know there is no language
> for what I want to say no language
> for mother and child…
> the words
> left to me are not muscular
> enough for what I want
> to say (42)

[3] While my dissertation limits itself to a consideration of fiction and poetry, there are a wealth of Canadian texts which explore the nexus of the maternal and the creative in other genres, such as plays by Wendy Lill (*Memories of You*, 1988) and Kim Renders (*Motherhood, Madness and the Shape of the Universe*, 1995), *Mom's the Word* (1994) by Linda A. Carson and a consortium of actresses and playwrights, and *Secret Life of a Mother* (2021) by Hannah Moscovitch with Maev Beaty and Ann-Marie Kerr. Notable memoirs which also address the experiences and subjectivity of the mother-writer include Marni Jackson's *The Mother Zone: Love, Sex and Laundry in the Modern Family* (1992), Camilla Gibb's *This is Happy* (2015) and two posthumous collections of personal essays by Margaret Laurence (*Dance on the Earth,* 1989) and Carol Shields (*Startle and Illuminate,* 2016, edited by Anne Giardini and Nicholas Giardini). These seven forementioned texts fit easily into the thematic paradigms of my project, and were excluded from analysis only due to considerations of length.

of the writers under consideration grapple with the tension, anxiety, and conflict that is generated by combining an artistic life with the demands and obligations of motherhood, they ultimately enact a feminist critique and mobilize modes of resistance against dominant, patriarchal discourses of motherhood and traditional representations of the (male) artist. My dissertation charts a thematic progression from the conceptual and material impossibilities of the mother-artist in Chapter One, to an opening and expansion of maternal-creative space in Chapter Two, to a visceral engagement with maternal corporeality (pregnancy, birth and lactation) in Chapter Three, and finally, to an expansion and elaboration of maternal consciousness in Chapter Four.

These four thematic paradigms chart a very rough chronology; there are more early texts that focus on the impossibilities, there is a surge of maternal-creative space that emerges alongside second-wave feminism, meditations on the maternal body grow in prominence in the later decades and, finally, texts which address maternal consciousness and subjectivity are most prevalent in the later twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. There are, of course, particular outlier texts which fall outside these parameters, but there is a general thematic teleology. Concurrent with this progression from impossibility to various paradigms of possibility (spatial, corporeal and subjective), is a significant movement from exteriority to interiority. The mother-artist is, at first, outside and beyond the boundaries of possibility, and then, with the opening of maternal-creative space, there is a drawing inward of the mother into artistic creation. With visceral and lyrical engagements with the maternal body, the texts then penetrate the liminality of corporeal articulations of the mother, and finally, with maternal consciousness, the texts arrive at the mother's interiority, centring their focus on her subjectivity and consciousness, her emotions, thoughts and experiences.

Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly, in their 2010 edited collection *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, chart a similar trajectory across time, from maternal absence, to ambivalence, to agency and finally, to communication (Podnieks and O'Reilly 12). Maternal absence correlates generally with my conception of the impossibility of the mother-artist, as it captures the extent to which "the mother [has] been lost to the broader traditions of literary history that have privileged narratives by and about male figures" (12). In grappling with the phenomenon of maternal absence, Podnieks and O'Reilly suggest that there can be various approaches and responses which capture "the topic in terms of how women negotiate patriarchal imperatives to be a 'good' mother with their own desires for autonomy and self-realization" (13). My chapter on the impossibility of the mother-artist can thus be read as one attempt to discursively explore this nexus of conflict between the demands of a selfless, patriarchal motherhood[4] and the apparently oppositional and selfish desire to create art and literature. The impossibility of the mother-artist can thus be conceived of as stemming from the traditional absence of the maternal in literature, which engenders a fundamental refusal of the possibility of maternal creativity and the figure of the mother-artist.

Also captured in my analysis is Podnieks and O'Reilly's theme of "maternal ambivalence," which derives from "cultural expectations and assumptions [that] presume and demand that a mother love her child unconditionally and selflessly" (15). As a result, "the mother who exhibits or admits to maternal ambivalence is judged harshly and rendered the object of shame and disbelief by society, by other mothers, and by the mother herself" (15). This

[4] Adrienne Rich defines patriarchal motherhood as an "institution which aims at ensuring that… all women… shall remain under male control" (Rich 13). Furthermore, "[i]n the most fundamental and bewildering of contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them" (13). O'Reilly further describes patriarchal motherhood as an "institution [that functions] to constrain, regulate and dominate women and their mothering" (O'Reilly *Rocking* 37). O'Reilly goes on to further reflect that "[t]he patriarchal ideology of motherhood makes mothering deeply oppressive to women…" (44).

internal frustration and conflict is chronicled most poignantly and explicitly in the texts I address in my first chapter on the impossibility of the mother-artist, but it also filters through a number of the texts that acknowledge the possibilities of maternity and creativity. Even where women writers are eager and able to combine their desire for children and their literary vocations, it requires a subtle balance among often competing needs and priorities. In short, it can be a delicate juggling act that is not always accomplished happily or gracefully. As Podnieks and O'Reilly explain, "in women's literatures, and in particular within matrifocal narratives in their attention to unmasking motherhood, we find… a more multifaceted, nuanced, and authentic representation of maternal ambivalence" (16). In the case of the texts I am considering in the following chapters, much of this ambivalence is not only about motherhood itself, but rather the complicated realities of combining it with a literary vocation.

The third paradigm Podnieks and O'Reilly employ to organize their understanding of the evolution of motherhood is "maternal agency," which they correlate with a movement away from the oppressions of patriarchal motherhood towards empowered mothering, the aim of which "is to reclaim… power for mothers, to imagine and implement a mode of mothering that mitigates the many ways that patriarchal motherhood, both discursively and materially, regulates and restrains mothers and their mothering" (17). The assertion of maternal agency is embedded within the various possibilities of the mother-artist, though its strongest expression is in the texts I consider in Chapter Four, which highlights those literary works that are most matrifocal, centring as they do on a primary, maternal consciousness. Furthermore, I will argue that this approach to literary expression remains subversive and revolutionary. As Podnieks and O'Reilly assert, "In patriarchal culture… we find few models, in literature or in life, of maternal agency in empowered mothering. That is why the emergence of the genre and tradition of matrifocal

narratives is crucial: matrifocal narratives, in unmasking motherhood and redefining maternity, impart such empowering depictions of maternal agency" (18).

Finally, "communication" is the fourth paradigm with which Podnieks and O'Reilly close their collection "because it bridges, and is a response to, the other sections on absence, ambivalence, and agency, and it signals a matrilineal tradition" (20). They explain that "[m]others find *themselves* as mothers… engaging in dialogue with multiple facets of their own identities as they may or may not come to terms with their maternal roles, desires, and needs" (20). And most importantly, they argue that "[t]he theme of communication has informed maternal thinking, to use [Sara] Ruddick's phrase, as well as maternal writing" (20). My dissertation, then, begins at this juncture, where maternal writing serves as an opening through which to explore not only the figure of the mother-artist, but elaborations of feminism, art and creativity. In a sense, each of the texts under consideration functions as an example of maternal communication, taking up as they do the plurality of maternal experiences, struggles and perspectives. Whether the mother-artist is rendered in terms of her impossibility, her spatial possibilities, her maternal corporeality or her consciousness, each of these thematic approaches are a form of maternal communication.

There is some notable and precedential scholarship that approaches Canadian literature through a matrifocal lens, including Di Brandt's *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature* (1993), which is prefaced by Brandt's reflections on being a young mother herself while undertaking her graduate studies, and wherein she argues that "the mother has been so largely absent in Western narrative, not because she is unnarratable, but because her subjectivity has been violently, and repeatedly, suppressed. Writing the mother story, or mother stories, therefore involves confronting this 'murder of the mother,' as [Luce] Irigaray calls it, in

Western social history and literature, as a political act" (7). Brandt seeks to recuperate the mother and maternal narratives, arguing "for a politicized reading of maternal narrative that takes into account the mother's traditional absence and the reasons for it, a politicized reading act that is *on the side* of maternal subjectivity. I wish to celebrate… the presence of the maternal reproductive body in history, in narrative, and in language" (*Wild* 9-10). In Brandt's study, she analyzes texts by Margaret Laurence, Daphne Marlatt, Jovette Marchessault, Joy Kogawa, SKY Lee and Katherine Martens's 1989 interviews with a community of Mennonite women. However, the texts she studies do not (with the exception of Laurence's *The Diviners*) have as their primary focus a mother-writer. So, while she was among the first to undertake a book-length maternal approach to a series of Canadian texts, she was not explicitly exploring the unique paradigm of the artist as well, with its attendant assumptions and complications.

Another scholarly antecedent to my project is Jessica Langston's 2004 Masters thesis from McGill University, "Writing Herself In: Mother Fiction and the Female *Kunstlerroman*." Langston addresses three texts, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974), Audrey Thomas's *Intertidal Life* (1984) and Carol Shields's *Unless* (2002), and their "creation of the mother-writer protagonist, a creation that validates writing the mother and the mother writing" (Langston 1). Her thesis "investigate[s] the ways in which the mother-writing is presented; the ways in which this figure challenges and changes the form and content of the portrait-of-the-*female*-artist novel; and finally, how these changes either improve or trouble the standard female *kunstlerroman*" (1-2). Langston briefly establishes a binary which she terms "The mother-artist Conundrum" (9), between "The Mother-[A]rtist As Impossibility" (9) and "The Mother-Artist as Possibility" (10), phraseology which I also employ in my analysis, but my usage of which involves a comprehensive literary analysis of dozens of texts. And while Langston addresses these two

oppositional concepts in just two pages, my dissertation complicates and troubles this easy binary, using it as a paradigmatic lens through which to explore feminism, maternity and artistry over the course of more than seventy years of texts by Canadian women writers (from the 1940s through to the present). Furthermore, while Langston focuses exclusively on the genre of the *kunstlerroman* as represented in her three chosen novels, my dissertation takes into its purview both short and long-form fiction and poetry. And while Langston seeks to establish a qualitative judgment as to whether or not the trope of the mother-artist "improve[s] or trouble[s] the standard *kunstlerroman*" (2), my dissertation highlights the multiplicity of maternal expression and how mother-artists navigate the contradictions and possibilities of a creative life and motherhood, enacting as they do a feminist resistance to the oppressions of patriarchal motherhood and masculine iterations of the artist. My analysis is thus more aligned with Coral Ann Howells, whose 2003 book, *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities*, emphasizes "women's counter-narratives to discourses of patriarchal authority in the home, the importance of maternal inheritance, and women's revisions of traditional narrative genres, which they reshape for their own purposes" (*Contemporary* 2).

Finally, Myrl Louise Coulter's PhD dissertation "Feminism, Motherhood, Jane Urquhart, Carol Shields, Margaret Laurence, and Me" (2007) explores the interconnectivity of feminism and motherhood as expressed in the work of Urquhart, Shields, and Laurence. Focusing on only three writers from the post-modern period, Coulter observes that "their works are richly informed representations of how middle-class white women lived and interpreted Canadian feminism in the second half of the twentieth century" (242) and concludes that their texts capture "the shift towards social conservatism in the latter part of the twentieth- and first part of the twenty-first centuries in North America" (243). My project, drawing as it does on a much wider variety of

maternal texts from a broader time period, arrives at a more radical conclusion, illuminating the ways in which the mother-artist is a revolutionary figure in Canadian literature. Coulter herself hints at this possibility when she remarks that "Canadian writers and thinkers who focus on feminism and mothering have a wealth of Canadian creative writers to draw from" (241) and suggests that "Perhaps because Canada has so many strong women writers who draw from the multicultural social order in which their sensibilities and talents were forged, mothers are everywhere in written Canadian art. While I have focused this work on three novelists who write from similar life locations, future explorations into creative representations of motherhood will find rich maternal material in poetry, drama, non-fiction, and autobiography" (241-242).

**Literary and Theoretical Contexts**

The apparently fundamental conflict between maternity and artistry has a long and varied history in the Western literary tradition. Virginia Woolf meditated upon this very problem almost a century ago in her famous essay, *A Room of One's Own* (1928), wherein she speculated on the reasons for the relative lack of artistic output by female writers in Western European history. Among her conclusions, alongside misogyny, poverty and a lack of political and economic freedom, was the bearing of children: "We have borne and bred and washed and taught, perhaps to the age of six or seven years, [all the] human beings who are… at present in existence, and that, allowing that some had help, takes time" (Woolf 130). Woolf concedes to an imagined future female writer, "You must, of course, go on bearing children, but, so they say, in twos and threes, not in tens and twelves" (130-131). She concludes that if there is to be any hope of women writers taking their rightful place in the literary canon, the interference of maternal obligations must, at the very least, be minimized.

Indeed, so problematic is the combination of motherhood and an artistic career that the conceptual, if not a material, division has persisted into the twenty-first century. Just a small sampling of the current cultural discourse on the subject of combining motherhood with a literary vocation reveals the troubling ambivalence and anxiety that continues to be generated by the figure of the mother-artist.[5] And in the Introduction to a 2011 edition of Simone de Beauvoir's landmark *The Second Sex* (1949), Judith Thurman reflects on Beauvoir's childlessness, remarking that, "Like Woolf, and a striking number of other great women writers, Beauvoir was childless" since "she regarded motherhood as a threat to her integrity" (x). Thurman supplements this observation with a lengthy footnote listing the most prominent and canonized women writers from the nineteenth century into the present who were also childless: "Jane Austen, George Eliot, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Louisa May Alcott, Christina Rossetti, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Gertrude Stein, Christina Stead, Isak Dinesen, Katherine Mansfield, Edith Wharton, Simone Weil, Willa Cather, Carson McCullers, Anna de Noailles, Djuna Barnes, Marianne Moore, Hilda Doolitte, Marguerite Yourcenar, Sigrid Undset, Else Lasker-Schüler, Eudora Welty, Lillian Hellman, Monique Wittig, to name a few" (x). Despite the vast cultural and political transformations ushered in by second-wave feminism, the oppositional relationship between motherhood and creativity clearly persists. In *Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood* (2008), the editors Shannon Cowan, Fiona Tinwei Lam and Cathy Stonehouse suggest that "the passion to write and the passion to mother… can be in direct conflict when there is too little in the well—be it time, space, energy, or inspiration" (xviii). They wonder, "Is conflict inevitable,

[5] Recent popular essays include Rufi Thorpe's article "Mother, Writer, Monster, Maid" (2013) in *Vela;* Lauren Sandler's "The Secret to Being Both a Successful Writer and a Mother: Have Just One Kid" (2013) in *The Atlantic;* Andreae Callanan's "Motherhood Consumes the Poet: The Literary Consequences of Raising a Child" (2016) in *The Walrus;* and Kim Brooks's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Mom: Is Domestic Life the Enemy of Creative Work?" (2018) in *The Cut*.

unavoidable, untenable—or is it momentary, resolvable, survivable, without ultimate loss?" (xviii).

The roots of this conflict between motherhood and artistry are two-fold. On the one hand, traditional evocations of the artist-figure, in both the genre of the *kunstlerroman* and in cultural assumptions more generally, function "within [a] Euro-American patriarchal context of discourse and representations and, more specifically, within a sex-gender system which… identifies writing as masculine and insists on the incompatibility of creativity and procreativity" (Hirsch 8). Margaret Atwood articulates these pervasive assumptions in her 2002 essay collection, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, where she recalls her youthful literary ambitions and the sacrifices that she assumed would be required,

> When I was an aspiring female poet, in the late 1950s, the notion of required sacrifice was simply accepted. The same was true for any sort of career for a woman, but Art was worse, because the sacrifice required was more complete. You couldn't be a wife and mother and also an artist, because each of these things required total dedication… Love and marriage pulled one way, Art another, and Art was a kind of demonic possession. Art would dance you to death. It would move in and take you over, and then destroy you. Or it would destroy you as an ordinary woman. (85)

She also reflects that "[o]rdinary women were supposed to get married, but not women artists. A male artist could have marriage and children on the side, as long as he didn't let them get in the way… but for women, such things were supposed to *be the way.* And so this particular way must be renounced altogether by the female artist, in order to clear the way for that other way—the way of Art" (83-84).

It is clear from Atwood's reflections that integral to the apparent conflict between motherhood and art is not merely cultural expectations of what it means to be an artist, but also what it means to be a mother. In 1976, at the height of second-wave feminism, celebrated American poet Adrienne Rich published *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, her ground-breaking feminist treatise on motherhood. Of her own experiences of being a poet and a young mother, she recalls,

> …I remember a cycle. It began when I had picked up a book or began trying to write… The child (or children) might be absorbed in busyness… but as soon as he felt me gliding into a world which did not include him, he would come to pull at my hand, ask for help, punch at the typewriter keys. And I would feel his wants at such a moment as fraudulent, as an attempt moreover to defraud me of living even for fifteen minutes as myself. (Rich 23)

*Of Woman Born* is widely considered the foundational text of the bourgeoning field of maternal theory, an area of critical inquiry that has—in recent decades—galvanized itself and is central to the methodology of my dissertation. Rich was among the first to deconstruct motherhood as an institution of patriarchy, one with its own "history" and "ideology" (33), and one which is intimately related not only to political economy, capitalism and the machinations of history, but also to "the regulation of women's reproductive power by men" (34). This "patriarchal mythology" posits on the one hand "the female body [as] impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination" and yet on the other hand, "as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and her physical potential for motherhood—that same body with its bleedings and mysteries—is her single destiny and justification in life" (34). Rich's analysis disentangles acts of mothering

(bearing and raising children) from their oppressive patriarchal iterations, and ultimately argues for an emancipation of women and mothers via a reclamation of their lived experiences of mothering and their maternal bodies. As she concludes, "I am really asking whether women cannot begin, at last, to *think through the body*," acknowledging that "[t]here is for the first time today a possibility of converting our physicality into both knowledge and power" (284). Alongside her contemporaries Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who theorize a similar feminist engagement with female and maternal corporeality, Rich laid bare for the first time the extent to which common and unspoken expectations and conceptions of motherhood were anything but "natural," but rather pervaded and defined by the oppressive ideology of patriarchy.

In the decades since the publication of *Of Woman Born*, important critical work on motherhood and feminism has been undertaken by second- and third-wave feminists and scholars. Much of this work either explicitly or implicitly underpins my analytical approach to the modern and contemporary Canadian texts about maternity and the mother-artist, such as Sara Ruddick's valorizing theories of maternal empowerment, experience and subjectivity. In contrast to the negative portrayals of motherhood elucidated by Rich and the early feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, Ruddick highlights many of the positive and beautiful aspects of mothering, experiences which reward women for becoming mothers, and furthermore, motivate them to want to combine mothering with their professional and artistic ambitions. As she writes,

> For many women, mothering begins in a fiercely passionate love that is not destroyed by the ambivalence and anger it includes. Many mothers develop early a sense of maternal competence—a sense that they can and will care for their children. Often they are socially rewarded for their work by the shared pleasure and confirmation of other

> mothers, by the gratitude and pride of grandparents, and frequently by the intense, appreciative love of their mates. At home mothers frequently have more control over the details of their work than many other workers do. Many mothers, whatever their other work, feel part of a community of mothers whose warmth and support is hard to match in other working relationships. When their children flourish, almost all mothers have a sense of well-being. (Ruddick 29-30)

Capturing not only the difficulties of motherhood, but also its rewards and pleasures, is integral to understanding the figure of the mother-artist, a woman who feels compelled to bear and raise children amidst the difficulties of establishing a career as a writer or visual artist, vocations which are often uncertain and tenuous, and generally poorly compensated. I also argue that in many, if not most, instances, the mother-artists who populate the texts I study find ways to mother beyond the boundaries of patriarchy as well.

Andrea O'Reilly's theory of empowered or feminist mothering, which emerges as a counter-discourse and practice that works to resist the ideology and oppressions of patriarchal motherhood (*Rocking* 15), is also integral to the modern and contemporary mother-artist. In many instances, as these women push the boundaries of what is possible in terms of their literature and their art, they also expand our accepted definitions of and possibilities for mothers and mothering. As my dissertation reveals, in many instances, the mother-artist of Canadian literature defies the archetypal white, married, heterosexual mother who is typically valorized and idealized in Western culture, and instead reflects the realities of divorced mothers, single mothers, lesbian mothers, Indigenous mothers, and Black or racialized mothers. O'Reilly explains that "[a] feminist practice/theory of mothering functions as counter narrative of motherhood. It seeks to interrupt the master narrative of motherhood to imagine and implement a

view of mothering that is *empowering* to women" (15). And finally, for O'Reilly, the terms "feminist and empowered" mothering are used "interchangeably to signify a mothering theory and practice that challenges, resists, and dismantles the patriarchal institution/ideology of motherhood" (16). And while empowered mothering may take many forms, depending on the individual mother, child and family, O'Reilly asserts that "empowered mothering begins with the recognition that both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy. Empowered mothering thus… calls into question the dictates of patriarchal motherhood" (18). However, just as masculinist myths of the artist persist into the twenty-first century, so too does the pernicious ideology of patriarchal motherhood. O'Reilly acknowledges that "while we may seek to mother against, outside, or beyond [patriarchal] motherhood, [empowered] mothering can never fully free itself from motherhood. In other words, even as we resist motherhood, it contains mothering. Despite our struggle to be otherwise, even the most resistant mothers find themselves, at times, restrained in and by the institution of motherhood. Indeed, even to imagine a mothering apart from motherhood may be impossible" (23). To this last point, however, I hope my dissertation provides somewhat of a discursive challenge, as many of the mother-writers of Canadian literature create texts and characters that *do* imagine and cultivate a multiplicity of interesting and empowering portraits of the artist as mother. However, the persistence of this tension, which in many ways parallels that between Romantic conceptions of the autonomous (male) artist and women's material realities of interdependence with their children, is never entirely resolved. Even as Canadian mother-writers work to subvert these dominant ideologies, it is impossible to ignore or evade them entirely.

Patrice DiQuinzio, in *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problem of Mothering* (1999), reframes this tension as one between the ideology of individualist subjectivity and the material interdependence of motherhood. DiQuinzio introduces the hegemonic concept of "essential motherhood," which she asserts is "complexly related" to individualism, and which she defines as follows: "According to essential motherhood, mothering is a function of women's essentially female nature, women's biological reproductive capacities, and/or human evolutionary development. Essential motherhood construes women's motherhood as natural and inevitable. It requires women's exclusive and selfless attention to and care of children based on women's psychological and emotional capacities for empathy, awareness of the needs of others, and self-sacrifice" (xiii). There are echoes here of Rich's construction of patriarchal motherhood, and DiQuinzio also suggests that this hegemony of essential motherhood is what makes motherhood so problematic for feminism due to feminism's reliance on individualist subjectivity as an argument for women's legal and political rights (xii). However, DiQuinzio also suggests a theoretical escape from the paradox of individualism and motherhood by reconceptualizing our understanding of subjectivity altogether. She suggests the possibility of a subjectivity that is informed by materiality, where "embodiment and subjectivity are reciprocally permeable and mutually over-determining, so that subjectivity is divided, partial, and fragmentary" (xvii). She suggests that the challenges motherhood poses to feminism indicate a "need for a theory of subjectivity as partial, divided, and fragmented" (xvii).

Mielle Chandler, in her essay "Emancipated Subjectivities and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices," acknowledges the divisions she encounters within herself as a mother and a writer/scholar. She explains, "To write a paper is to leave mothering, or, rather, it is to leave the type of subjectivity I engage in while mothering" (271). She continues, "As I write, a child

asleep in the next room, part of me is still on duty, ready to battle dream monsters or change wet sheets, making a mental note to tell the babysitter (that is, the stand-in mother whose labour affords me, temporarily, a paper-writing subjectivity) that the child can't go swimming tomorrow" (271). Chandler describes the material realities of this divided sense of self as a "process… of travelling between an individuated and separated subjectivity which allows me to write, and an actively in-relation subjectivity (if it can be called a subjectivity) which is born of mothering. It is an existence fraught with tension, for while each site demands my attention, the former requiring quiet sustained concentration, the latter the alertness of a catcher behind home plate, neither allows me to inhabit the other adequately" (271). Chandler articulates this sense of paradoxical splitting that the mother-artists of my dissertation also grapple with in their narratives and their poetry. But like DiQuinzio, she also suggests conceptual and material modes of resistance to these supposedly binary identities: "It is my position that 'mother' is best understood as a verb, as something one does, a practice which creates one's identity as intertwined, interconnected and in-relation. Mothering is not a singular practice, and mother is not best understood as a monolithic identity" (273). Chandler acknowledges the materiality of mothering, and the webs of subjective interrelation motherhood engenders: "To mother is to clean, to mop, to sweep, to keep out of reach, to keep safe, to keep warm, to feed, to take small objects out of mouths, to answer impossible questions… It is everfailing [*sic*] imitations of socially constructed ideals. It is a series of responses to the fundamental needs of another who is so interconnected with the self that there exists no definitive line of differentiation" (274). Chandler radically asserts that "mothering does mean a loss of individual agency and autonomy for mothers" (278) but that "[t]he problematic lies not in the equation of motherhood with nonsubjectivity but in the privileging of an emancipated individuated subjectivity" (278) in the

first place. If motherhood challenges and, in fact, erases the possibility of "emancipated individuated subjectivity," then what emerges in its stead is a subjectivity that is unapologetically interrelated, interdependent and inseparable from a mother's child(ren). And as my dissertation explores, many of the mother-artists embrace their motherhood as an integral part of their self-conception, undertaking their creative work in the fullness of their motherhood, and often making mothers and mothering the subject of their texts as well. The mother-artist opens up possibilities for new subjectivities of both the mother and the artist, refusing "essential motherhood" as well as "individuated subjectivity" to forge a new identity in which artistic creation flourishes and the mother is both articulated and celebrated.

One way in which the authors achieve this is, as I explore in Chapter Three, through a focus on corporeality and lyrical iterations of the maternal body. Just as DiQuinzio and Chandler challenge assumptions about identity, subjectivity and motherhood, theorists like Margrit Shildrick in *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries* (1997) argue that any "feminist rewriting of the subject… demands an attention to the corporeal body" (Shildrick 167). Rather than succumbing to many of the ideological traps of essential motherhood or biological determinism, Shildrick asserts that the body "is always plural, fluid and unbounded… It is then neither fixed nor solid nor singular, but it does have materiality and its possibilities are those of the distinctly feminine" (178). Rich articulates a similar approach in *Of Woman Born*, when she exhorts women to "begin, at least, to *think through the body*" (Rich 284) and "convert[…] our physicality into both knowledge and power" (284). Attention to the maternal body began in earnest with the French theorists of the 1970s (namely among the work of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray), and has remained a potent symbol of women's power and expression through subsequent decades. For example, Rishma Dunlop's 2007 anthology, *White Ink: Poems on*

*Mothers and Motherhood*, uses Cixous's term "white ink" as her title. Dunlop likewise quotes Cixous in her epigraph: "*A woman is never far from 'mother'… There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink*" (Dunlop 1). The interconnectivity between the (symbolic) procreativity of the maternal body and the literary creativity of the female-poet is made explicit in the title of Dunlop's edited collection.

Like the poems featured in *White Ink*, a great deal of maternal, feminist and biopolitical theory crosses national boundaries. However, modern and contemporary Canadian literature provides a rich context for exploring the nexus of motherhood and artistry. There has been a recent proliferation in Canada of anthologies, essay collections and poetry related to the theme of motherhood, as well as a strong matrilineage of maternal texts stretching back into the 1940s. However, there has been a relative dearth of literary scholarship examining this work through the lens of maternal theory. From a geopolitical standpoint, Canada remains a relatively young and evolving nation, and one still deeply invested in national narratives of continuity, community and belonging. The galvanizing of Canadian culture around the centennial celebrations of the 1960s, which also significantly coincides with the rise of feminist theory and activism, make the mid-century period in Canadian literature a fulsome place to begin my research.

**Canadian Modernist and Feminist Contexts**

Canadian literary modernism is generally considered to post-date the emergence of European modernism by a generation. As Brian Trehearne argues, the Canadian modernist period extends roughly from 1920 to 1960, a period wherein the nation's poets and artists sought "to bring the country's poetry out of late Romantic stasis after the Great War into a fertile and combative response to the cultural, political, technological, philosophical, religious, and

economic conditions of the modern era" (Trehearne 434). Of "the kinds of rich historical contextualization that remain to be provided in the study of modern poetry in Canada" (438), certainly the perceptions and expressions of maternity in the 1940s and 50s, and their intersection with bourgeoning feminist sentiment and action in the post-World War Two era in Canada, provide a ripe and largely unexplored intersectional field of inquiry. Trehearne cites the inter- and post-war period in Canada as one in which poets grappled with "[t]he great cataclysmic events of the twentieth century" (438), and wherein the social and literary landscape is infused with "a mood of cultural devastation and loss that coupled vitally but paradoxically with a fervent sense of moral liberation, a bubble of rapid economic expansion and profit… and dramatic new art forms" (438). Many modernist Canadian poets adopted and espoused various iterations of leftist politics, advocating socialist principles or, in a few instances, radical communism (438-9). In particular, women writers played a significant role in this movement, even as they were often forced to "disassociate their female identities from the feminine metaphors and images typically used to criticize conservative artistic tradition as well as liberal bourgeois politics" (Rifkind 11). Nonetheless, Trehearne observes that it was during the Canadian modernist period that "Canadian poets first confronted global conflict… and shaped a language of resistance; first raised questions of gender in economic, psychological, canonical, and ecological terms, and gave shape to feminist autobiography" (445).

With respect to women's liberation in early twentieth-century Canada, the suffrage movement expanded across the provinces from 1916 to 1940 (Canada 338), granting women at first partial and then finally full political enfranchisement. Initially spurred by the exigencies of the First World War in English Canada, by 1918 the federal government had enshrined

"universal adult suffrage"[6] and, while Quebec suffragist groups faced significant resistance from the francophone nationalist movement and the Catholic clergy, Quebecois women also finally secured the right to vote in 1940 (Forestell and Moynagh 117). While Jill Vickers observes that current scholarship tends to downplay connections between the suffragist movement of the early twentieth century and second-wave feminism following the Second World War, she argues for the existence of a clear "continuity of thought" that runs through the many "generations of women's movements over their century of existence" (Vickers 39).[7] While feminist emancipation might have first galvanized over political enfranchisement, Vickers traces the transference of feminist ideals from the suffragist "Old Feminists" to the "New Feminists" through their joint involvement in the women's caucuses of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in the 1930s, the Voice of Women in the 1960s and other left-wing groups and activities (39). Likewise, Micheline Dumont reveals the erroneousness of the commonly held view that "the first wave… faded after women were given the right to vote," arguing that this perspective "does not help us to situate our own history" (72). Despite the problematic boundaries and slippery delineations of first-, second- and third-wave feminisms, and the difficulties inherent in trying to capture the "complicated web of consciousness-raising groups, task forces, collectives, women's caucuses, women's centres, women's studies programs, feminist publishing houses… women's conferences, feminist marches, feminist cultural events… feminist bookstores, and women's shelters" (Backhouse 4), it can nonetheless be reasonably argued that feminism did not simply vanish from the Canadian sociocultural milieu from the

---

[6] It must be noted that this "universal" suffrage was itself limited, and did not include "Aboriginals, Chinese, Japanese [or] 'Hindu' immigrants" (Forestell and Moynagh 117).

[7] Judy Rebick observes that members of the Voice of Women in the 1960s "had much in common politically with first-wave feminists, who had fought for women's suffrage and believed that having more women in public life would create a more just and more peaceful society" (3). The Voice of Women has also been described by Ursula Franklin as "the seedbed for the second-wave of feminism" in Canada (Rebick 3).

1920s until the 1960s, but rather remained a vital, though frequently sublimated, component of women's collective consciousness and cultural discourse.[8]

Indeed, motherhood at this particular historical juncture undergoes something of a transformation as well, in part as a result of the suffrage movement, increased female political participation, and the publication of some foundational feminist philosophy, but also thanks to "significant medical advances in birth technology and contraception" which render motherhood in the inter-war period "less life-threatening and more of a choice for women" (Hirsch 15). Interestingly, motherhood is employed strategically by some suffragettes as a justification for increased political participation on the part of mothers. For example, the *Political Equality League* in Victoria, British Columbia, organized feminist study clubs, and the club's chairperson in 1912, Mrs. Baer, argued for the inclusion of women in the political process by virtue of their indispensable role as "Mother[s] of the Race": "By the very nature of motherhood, racial progress and development is largely in the hands of women, and the rights and privileges of citizenship should be hers, in order that she may have liberty to serve and care for her children more adequately" ("Political Equality League" 139-40). Notwithstanding the problematic nationalist and racist rhetoric, it is interesting that motherhood here is coopted into the fight for political enfranchisement, rather than being viewed as an obstacle to female emancipation (a more common position elaborated on extensively by Beauvoir and Betty Friedan later in the

[8] After all, it is towards the end of the Canadian modernist period that Simone de Beauvoir's landmark feminist text, *The Second Sex*, is published—first in French in 1949, and in English translation in 1953. And while its specific impact on Canadian culture is difficult to quantify, it functions as an interesting discursive expression of feminist cultural considerations that are beginning to emerge in the Western world. Beyond the fact that *The Second Sex* has been described as "one of the most important books of the twentieth century, upon which much of the modern feminist movement was built" (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier xx), Beauvoir articulated in meticulous detail the extent to which "Child care, like housekeeping, is still almost exclusively the woman's burden" (Beauvoir 152-153) and that as a result, a "woman has a harder time reconciling her family and work life" (153). For unusually accomplished women of Beauvoir's generation, "even if women lawyers, doctors, and teachers manage to have some help in their households, the home and children still entail responsibilities and cares that are a serious handicap for them" (154).

twentieth-century). The same 1912 article goes on to exhort that motherhood should function as women's rallying cry to emancipation: "When are we going to fully realize that instead of being a condition imposed, motherhood should bear the royal insignia of freedom? … We are the Mother of the Race, not the subject of the man" (140). However, the lived social and economic reality of women in Canada in the first half of the twentieth-century belies this emancipatory rhetoric; for all the imagined "freedom" of motherhood, women and especially mothers remained economically dependent on their husbands throughout most of the twentieth century.[9]

**Matrophobia and the Second-Wave**

The advent of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and '70s ushered in seemingly endless possibilities for women's lives, from increased accessibility to contraception and abortion, to widespread protest and activism for women's rights, and finally to professional opportunities that allowed them to take on careers alongside their male peers for the first time. While some theorists trace the beginnings of the second-wave all the way back to the post-World War Two era and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) (Walters 97-98), the general consensus seems to be that the galvanizing moment, where feminism came into its own as a political and cultural movement, was the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963

[9] According to a 1983 sociological review of gendered employment statistics in Canada since the 1930s entitled "The Changing Roles of Canadian Women in Family and Work," women's overall workforce participation remained below 25% from the 1930s into the 1950s, and for married women, their participation was even more markedly low: only 4% engaged in paid, professional labour through the 1930s and 1940s, rising to 11% in the 1950s and 22% in the 1960s (Lupri and Mills 50). Even in the wake of the sea-change of second-wave Western feminism throughout the 1960s and 1970s, married women's workforce participation was only 43% in 1976 (50) and among women with small children, participation fell to 26% (51). Beyond the statistics, the societal pressure on women and mothers to devote their energy to domestic life to the exclusion of virtually everything else remained a powerful and oppressive force throughout the twentieth-century. A 1976 census found that 75% of Canadians still "believe[d] that mothers should stay home with their children," a finding that was statistically consistent across age and gender (58). One can imagine that if these views still predominated so strongly into the 1970s, they were likely even more pronounced decades earlier, through the 1940s and 1950s.

(Walters 102; Hannam 137; Snitow 34; Rebick 5). In marked contrast to women's significant participation in the war effort in the 1940s, the 1950s witnessed a resurgence in the mythology of the nuclear family in the West (Hannam 134). Prior to Friedan's landmark polemic against the patriarchal oppression of women, "the image of the contented wife and mother, giving all her attention to housework, children and the care of her husband was widespread in popular magazines and advertisements" (134). However, Friedan's text "exploded the myth of the happy housewife in the affluent, white, American suburbs" (Walters 102).

The "women's liberation movement, as it was popularly called, swept through North America and western Europe" (Hannam 133), and "the image of the perfect wife and mother was increasingly at odds with the realities of women's lives… As young women took advantage of the opportunities offered by an expansion in higher education they were less content than their mothers to accept a future bounded by domesticity. At the same time married women began to enter the labour force in larger numbers" (136). In addition to publishing *The Feminine Mystique,* Friedan was also one of the founding members of the National Organization for Women in the United States, which declared at its first conference in Washington that "its aims were to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society so that they could reach their full potential as human beings. It sought to use the law to gain equality of opportunity in employment and education and to achieve equal civil and political rights and responsibilities for women" (Hannam 138).

Contemporaneously in Canada, "the Toronto Women's Liberation Movement [was] founded in 1967" while "The Feminine Action League was established at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, soon followed by the Women's Caucus in Vancouver. By 1969 similar groups existed in Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Kingston, Guelph, Hamilton, Halifax,

Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Edmonton and Montreal" (Rebick 8). A collective of these women's organizations united in 1966 to pressure the Canadian government to establish a Royal Commission on the Status of Women (Hannam 137), which was formally appointed the following year. Broadly speaking, the purpose of the Commission was "to inquire into and report upon the status of women in Canada, and to recommend what steps might be taken by the Federal Government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian society" (Canada vii). The Commission's findings, the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada,* appeared in 1970, and proposed widespread political, legal and policy changes to accommodate the ideological shift that was transforming Western society as a result of the burgeoning and increasingly vociferous feminist movement. Among their recommendations was the legalization of abortion within the first three months of pregnancy (Canada 286), establishing a comprehensive system of and increased funding for daycare for working mothers (269-272), and requiring that increased efforts be made to encourage and promote women in Crown Corporations (128-132). Interestingly, the Report concluded that women in the arts in Canada tended to be better represented than in other endeavours, observing that "Although fewer women than men have achieved prominence as creative artists, those few rank with the finest the country has produced… Women who are novelists and poets, writing in French or English, have received acclaim from distinguished critics as well as from the public" (152). However, the Commissioners acknowledge that

> many talented women have been held back from the highest development of their art by personal counter-demands. Creative art often calls for detachment from the needs of home and family, long stretches of time dedicated to the art alone, some economic independence and, as Virginia Woolf expressed it, 'a room of one's own'… In our

> present society, many women are enmeshed in family responsibilities. When new social attitudes encourage gifted women to give up other duties and devote themselves more fully to art, a higher proportion of our most highly acclaimed creative artists may be women. (152)

However, as evidenced by the Canadian literary texts I consider in this dissertation, which attempt to grapple with the difficulties and conflicts inherent to "giv[ing] up other duties" to "devote themselves more fully to art" (152), this is neither an easy nor a simple proposition. "Giving up" motherhood entirely, or withdrawing from active mothering, is something that most mother-artists do not necessarily desire, even if it were possible.

This dilemma is reflected in the liberationist feminism of the second-wave, which "implied a greater sense of personal empowerment and choice, adventure and sexual power free from prevailing ideas of what it meant to be a woman" (Hannam 147), while paradoxically, women's lived, material realities, especially within the patriarchal family structure, continued to remain constrained and fraught. Within feminist theory and activism, "there was a general silence on mothering and motherhood in 1960s and early 1970s white second-wave feminism" (Hallstein 4). This elision of and discomfort with motherhood was likely due to the perception that motherhood was deeply complicit with patriarchal structures of power. As Rich observes in *Of Woman Born*, "At the core of patriarchy is the individual family unit" (60). And within this family unit, "[t]he experience of maternity… [has] been channeled to serve male interests" (Rich 42). The mother is thus a potent figure that has been coopted into her own oppression: "the mother serves the interests of patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience, and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions" (45). At this early historical moment in feminist theory and activism, the concept of mothering

beyond the confines of patriarchy had yet to be imagined. Instead, liberated, feminist women of the 1970s who also felt a desire to bear children appeared to be left with a series of impossible, binary choices. As Rich outlines, "[t]he twentieth-century, educated young woman, looking perhaps at her mother's life, or trying to create an autonomous self in a society which insists that she is destined primarily for reproduction, has with good reason felt that the choice was an inescapable either/or: motherhood or individuation, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom" (160).

**Feminist Contexts of the 1980s**

Following the tremendous political, professional and personal gains of feminism in the 1970s, women assumed newfound positions of public power and prestige (Hallstein 50), which were also reflected in literary and philosophical discourses. As D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein notes, "the rhetorical context of the 1980s through the mid-1990s was fundamentally different from that of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, there was a seismic shift in the rhetorical context—the larger political and cultural context—of 1980s and mid-1990s feminism: feminists began to live with the successes of the hard-fought battles of the 1970s" (50). In Canada, by the 1980s, many of the gains sought by feminist activists had already been enshrined in law, from the decriminalization of birth control, abortion and homosexuality, to anti-discrimination laws that protected women's right to equal access to educational institutions and professions, to the establishment of Women's Studies programs in universities and the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (Strong-Boag *1960-85* n.pag.). However, as Susan Faludi notes in *Backlash* (1991), notwithstanding these tremendous gains, the cultural discourse of the 1980s emphasized and reified the myth of the miserable modern woman, whose unhappiness purportedly stemmed

directly from her feminist liberation (Faludi 2). The prevailing popular wisdom seemed to suggest that it was women's striving for independence, autonomy and professional success that engendered a deep, personal dissatisfaction, namely a marked loss of "the greatest female adventure" of marriage and childbearing (2).[10] It is not surprising then, that feminist discourse around motherhood and maternal experience remained deeply conflicted and problematic. As DiQuinzio observes, "Some feminists have argued that mothering is the source of women's limitations or the cause of women's oppression, because it is the experience in which women most suffer under the tyranny of nature, biology, and/or male control" (ix). And for women whose ambitions were to write and who felt perhaps more liberated to do so by second-wave feminist advancements, the spectre of motherhood still presented significant conflicts, perhaps in part due to the fact that "the moves of North American and European feminist writing and theorizing in the 1970s and 80s… succeed in inscribing the female into… male [literary] plot[s] only by further silencing one aspect of women's experience and identity—the maternal" (Hirsch 4).

**Maternal Subjectivity and the Emergence of the Third-Wave**

The consensus among most scholars is that feminism's third-wave emerged as a cohesive, generational force in the 1990s. Astrid Henry argues that "the third wave represents a shift within feminist thought, moving it in a new direction by blending aspects of second-wave feminism with other forms of contemporary critical theory, such as queer, post-colonial, and

[10] It must be noted that Faludi's text works to expose and dispel these very "backlash" myths as works of cultural fiction, though for my purposes here, I seek to highlight their discursive, cultural prevalence. But Faludi is clear that while "[n]ewsstands and airwaves may have been awash with frightening misinformation on spinster booms, birth dearths, and deadly day care… women continued to postpone their wedding dates, limit their family size, and combine work with having children" (461).

critical race theories" (34-35). In a more material sense, June Hannam suggests that third-wave feminists "who have benefited from social changes since 'second wave feminism' focus on the body and sexuality as areas where struggle still has to take place. They have also joined into campaigns around global issues including environmentalism, anti-capitalist and anti-corporate activities, cultural production and human-rights questions" (165). In a specifically Canadian context, Veronica Strong-Boag notes that the third-wave "embraced a widening challenge to inequality. In special groups and coalitions, they increasingly tackled not only gender inequality but inequality associated with class, race, sexualities and ability" (*1985-present* n.pag).

While the majority of early maternal theory and dominant, second-wave feminist philosophy reaches towards or implicitly assumes a universal experience of motherhood, it is nonetheless inflected by and often oblivious of its privilege and blind to the realities of racialized women. As bell hooks writes in 1984, "Like Friedan before them, white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases" (3). However, feminism's third-wave attempts to acknowledge the unique concerns and oppressions engendered by race, sexuality, and cultural identity in order to allow for a more diverse, inclusive and nuanced portrait of motherhood. Racialized or marginalized women often experience motherhood within vastly different political and personal paradigms, finding culturally-specific meaning and empowerment in their experiences of mothering. Unlike the dominant, white, heteronormative conceptions of motherhood as an inherently oppressive institution that subjugates women and limits their freedom, for many racialized women, motherhood symbolizes and affirms their power and humanity in the face of racism and discrimination. As hooks explains, "While there are white

women activists who may experience family primarily as an oppressive institution… many black women find the family the least oppressive institution. Despite sexism in the context of the family, we may experience dignity, self-worth, and a humanization that is not experienced in the outside world" (38). In fact, mothering within a familial context is essential to Black women's reclamations of their sense of self: "Historically, black women have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing" (133).

Indigenous women in Canada (and in North America generally) have faced similar dehumanizing oppressions under colonization and its long, painful legacy. As Elizabeth Rule observes of the colonial project, "Like the land itself, the settler state views Indigenous women as what could be—and must be—conquered and controlled as a way to secure and maintain Indigenous dispossession" (743). Indigenous mothers have been directly impacted by "colonization and settlers, boarding [Residential] school, loss of parenting and languages, forced sterilization, and loss of community" (Minthorn 63). This systemic violence and dispossession is in stark contrast to the power and reverence women and mothers were afforded in Indigenous cultures before the arrival of the Europeans: "Pre-contact Indigenous women in North America enjoyed considerable power, social status, respect, and influence" and "were treated with reverence, as the givers of life. They were seen as the keepers of tradition, practices, and customs, and the decision makers in realms of family, property rights, and education" (Shahram 14). However, under the direct influence of colonization, "patriarchy and paternalism became dominant features of Indigenous societies" and "women's roles within Indigenous family units were annihilated" (16). Even as Indigenous mothers today work to reclaim their traditions and

their power, they nonetheless "continue to navigate their experiences of motherhood under the constant and unrelenting gaze of the state" (20). Indigenous resistance to this colonial domination is a commonality that unites the histories of diverse Indigenous communities across the globe (Lavell-Harvard and Anderson 2) while also setting Indigenous women apart from their non-Indigenous counterparts (5). While "non-Indigenous women are struggling to break free from the constraints of the patriarchal family and the oppression of motherhood, many of our women have resisted (or been excluded) and, as a result, have always existed outside these particular paradigms" (5). As a result, motherhood is experienced in inherently different terms for Indigenous women, as "generations of resistance and resilience means… Indigenous women do not necessarily face the same dilemma as we work instead to reclaim and revitalize the more empowering cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices of our ancestors" (5).

With this increased awareness of and sensitivity to the variety of cultural and historical experiences of women who have been faced with racial and colonial oppressions, third-wave feminism is defined by its very multiplicity and fragmentation. Henry also suggests that it is defined by its focus on "individuality and individual definitions of feminism" (Henry 43). She goes on to observe that "Within this 'ideology of individualism,' feminism has frequently been reduced to one issue: choice" (44). Consequently, "[f]eminism… becomes an ideology of individual empowerment to make choices, no matter what those choices are" (45). Choice, and particularly reproductive choice, also becomes a central feature of motherhood in the third-wave, where women in the Western world are empowered and able to control if, when and how they bear and raise children. Third-wave feminism is also the context within which the field of maternal theory emerges as a distinct discipline, and there is a veritable proliferation of scholarship produced on all aspects of maternal experience and discourse. However,

notwithstanding this theoretical progress and preoccupation, motherhood continues to engender substantial challenges within feminist theory and women's lived experiences. Especially in the context of individuality and choice, how can a woman's desire to bear and nurture children be reconciled with the paradoxical drive to retain an autonomous, independent individuality? Especially when mothering children requires, to a large extent, an erasure of the boundaries of self and other, and a self-sacrificing preoccupation with the needs of another person? Daphne de Marneffe explores the paradoxical nature of women's concurrent desires for autonomous self-actualization and motherhood in "The 'Problem' of Maternal Desire" (2004).[11] In contrast to second-wave feminism, which generally viewed motherhood as an oppressive expression of patriarchal hegemony, de Marneffe makes the radical suggestion that "maternal desire is a valid focus of personal exploration" and that acknowledging it "is not a step backward but a step forward, toward greater awareness and a truer model of the self" ("Problem" de Marneffe 670). She defines maternal desire as "the longing felt by a mother to nurture her children; the wish to participate in their mutual relationship; and the choice, insofar as it is possible, to put her desire into practice" (668). She summarizes the history and current state of reconciling motherhood with professional ambitions as follows:

> Fifty years ago, women who wished to realize professional ambitions dealt with gender inequality by refusing or relinquishing motherhood. Twenty years ago, mothers evaded gender inequality by keeping up their professional pace and not letting motherhood interfere with their work. Women continue to recognize the impediments to earning power and professional accomplishments that caring for children presents. But the

[11] As I explore in greater detail in Chapter Four, in addition to this essay, de Marneffe also wrote a book-length project entitled *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life* (2004).

> problem remains that for many women, these approaches to attaining equality don't deal with the central issue, namely that caring for their children *matters* deeply to them. (669)

However, beyond identifying the conflict or problem inherent in maternal desire, de Marneffe does not posit any singular solution, but acknowledges that

> we do not know how to think about the desire to mother. We have trouble understanding it within ourselves, in terms of our psychological and feminist theories, and in the public debates and institutions that structure our lives. The critical issue that has eluded theory and social debate is that caring for young children is something mothers often view as extraordinarily important both for their children *and* for themselves. (679)

In this context, it is not surprising that the sentiment of motherhood's impossibilities for feminist women persists through the third-wave, and into the contemporary moment. Writers continue to grapple with the multitude of personal, professional and creative conflicts that emerge when they attempt to mother their children with the attention and intensity they desire, and still retain a sense of their own independence and actualize themselves professionally or creatively. The chapters that follow explore this paradoxical nexus of (pro)creativity through shifting lenses of impossibility, possibility, corporeality and subjectivity. They illuminate the modern and contemporary emergence of the mother-artist as a powerful creative presence and motif in Canadian literature by women and demonstrate her alignment with feminist practices of mothering that reach beyond the limitations imposed by patriarchal motherhood. Furthermore, discourses of the mother-artist enact a feminist transformation of the mother from the traditionally silenced maternal figure of psychoanalytic paradigms to an empowered, active and creative agent in her own right. The mother-artist ultimately explodes the limitations of motherhood by insisting on artistic and creative space for her experiences of mothering, and

likewise refuses Romantic and essentially masculinist notions of the artist as solitary, isolated and autonomous. Instead, the figure of the mother-artist reveals herself to be interrelated, intersubjective and simultaneously intertwined with both her art and her children. In order to capture the breadth of cultural and literary discourse around feminism, maternity and artistry, the following chapters address fiction and poetry that feature a mother-artist as their central protagonist and capture the nexus of maternity and creativity. In exploring this intersection of motherhood and artistry, my analysis draws attention to both form and content, highlighting the similar ways in which the mother-artist is articulated in lyric poetry and fictional narrative representation. The thematic continuity of the mother-artist throughout allows for a cohesive consideration of a variety of formal and generic expressions which capture texts across seventy years of Canadian literature, from the 1940s into the present.

As mentioned above, rather than a strictly linear approach, my chapters will be structured around four conceptualizations or subject-positions of the mother-artist, from impossibility, to possibility, to corporeality, to subjectivity. The chapters also capture a transition from exteriority (sociocultural and spatial articulations of maternity) to liminality (the maternal body) to interiority (maternal consciousness and subjectivity). Within each chapter/paradigm, however, the texts are organized chronologically by publication date. And while the transitions from impossibility to possibility to corporeality to subjectivity are not absolute, there is a general progression in that there are more texts from the 1940s – 1950s that approach the mother-artist as an impossible paradox, more texts from the 1970s – 2000s that regard the mother-artist as possible and mutually reinforcing, more texts from the 1990s – 2010s that address corporeality, and even more texts from the 2000s – 2010s that embrace maternal subjectivity as a defining principle in their approach. There are obviously outliers in each chapter—for example, Katherine

Govier's 1985 short story takes up the mother-artist as impossibility despite its relatively late publication date, and some of Dorothy Livesay's poems from the 1940s address maternal corporeality far ahead of the time period wherein they grew more prominent. It is also important to acknowledge that while the texts I engage in my dissertation focus on biological motherhood (the only exception is Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Adult Onset*, which examines adoptive motherhood), there are a variety of other equally valid maternal roles that women (and men) can occupy, including adoptive-mothering, step-mothering, foster-mothering, surrogate mothering, etc., along with mothers who have suffered the loss of their children, through miscarriage, stillbirth or death.[12] Notwithstanding all the complex and equally legitimate iterations of motherhood, I have aligned my approach to the mother-artist—again, with the noteworthy exception of MacDonald's novel—with that of Di Brandt in *Wild Mother Dancing*, where she identifies the "mother" under consideration as "the biological mother who is also the active, caretaking mother of the child" (8).

**Impossibility, Possibility, Corporeality, Subjectivity**

Chapter One, "'No One's Mother': The Impossibility of the Mother-Artist", focuses on the traditional, discursive binary between the artist and the mother, citing its long literary history, from Virginia Woolf in 1926 to Sheila Heti in 2018, and the numerous writers and scholars who have chronicled the absence of mothers among the literary giants of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. Its literary analysis begins with a selection of modernist poetry by Dorothy Livesay from the 1940s and early 1950s, which renders the mother-artist as a conceptual impossibility, or as generative of untenable internal conflict. My analysis is also further

[12] Melanie Dennis Unrau's *Happiness Threads: The Unborn Poems* is a noteworthy poetry collection that addresses themes of pregnancy loss, which I analyze in more detail in Chapter Three.

contextualized with excerpts from Livesay's memoir, *Journey with My Selves* which reflect on Livesay's own experiences of motherhood. Staying with the modernist period, the chapter then moves on to Anne Wilkinson who, while not nearly as prolific a writer as Livesay, engages with the supposed binary of the mother-artist most explicitly in her poem "Lens," and reveals her own inner conflict and struggles with how to be a good mother/wife/woman while still practicing her literary craft in selections from her journals from the posthumously published *The Tightrope Walker*. Katherine Govier's 1985 collection, *Fables of Brunswick Avenue,* features "The Night-tender," which also suggests that motherhood and artistic practice are fundamentally incompatible or generate untenable conflicts. My analysis of Govier's short story is further supplemented by the paratextual material in the twentieth anniversary edition from 2005, which includes a postscript consisting of an author interview and supplementary essays, which delve further into Govier's own experiences of being a mother-writer and the difficulties and sense of conflict that are inherent to her experience. The chapter then turns to a story by Alice Munro entitled "To Reach Japan," which appears in her 2012 collection *Dear Life.* In it, the central protagonist Greta is a newly published, emerging writer and mother to a two-year-old daughter. Over the course of the narrative, which is set in the 1960s, Greta also grapples with her guilt at her literary ambitions, a vocation which she correlates with neglecting her daughter.

Chapter Two, "'All I want is everything': Maternal Space and the Possibilities of the Mother-Artist," begins to explore the discursive shift from impossibility into possibility for women who choose to mother and write. Amidst the burgeoning feminist movements of the late-twentieth century, and the growing body of maternal theory, the figure of the mother-artist grows in both her possibilities and her prominence. The texts in this chapter are likewise published in the final decades of the twentieth-century and the first few years of the twenty-first century. I

begin with Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, published in 1974, as the first Canadian novel with a main protagonist, Morag, who is a single mother and a writer of novels herself. I explore the interconnectedness of Morag's creative life and her motherhood, and how her liberation from her oppressive patriarchal marriage coincides with the publication of her first novel and her new single-motherhood as well. Audrey Thomas's novel *Intertidal Life*, published in1984, is then addressed in my analysis. Her protagonist, Alice is—like Morag—a single mother after her romantic relationship collapses, and who presents a new vision of the mother-artist as creatively productive and independent. Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, published in 1988, also features a mother-artist as its central protagonist, painter Elaine Risley. She becomes a mother in the latter-half of the text, and Atwood chronicles Elaine's struggles with the exhaustion and disconnection new motherhood brings into her life, and her ability to overcome them to return to an active and successful career as an artist. Carol Shields's final novel, *Unless*, brings the chapter into the twenty-first century, with its mother-writer protagonist Rita. Through Rita, Shields affirms the possibilities of the mother-artist, as Rita struggles to have her literary work taken more seriously by her editor, actively plots out the new novel she is working on, and seeks out the causes for her eldest daughter's dereliction on the streets of Toronto. The text also celebrates the quotidian tasks of domestic work, as they help Rita to sort through her thoughts and find the inner resources to both continue writing and remain hopeful of her daughter's return. A couple of years later, Jeannette Armstrong's *Whispering in Shadows* (2004) features mother-artist Penny Jackson, an Indigenous woman, painter and activist from the Okanagan in British Columbia. Penny has three children and—like Morag and Alice—is also a single mother.[13] Penny does not

[13] It is worth noting that in the majority of the texts featuring a mother-artist at their helm, the most difficult and disruptive element of the women's lives is their male, romantic partners. It seems that patriarchal marriage/relationships are the greatest obstacle to the mother-artist's success, rather than her children. In a similar

experience a conceptual or foundational conflict between her creativity and her maternity, however the novel does record some of Penny's material struggles between the demands of her career as a visual artist and her troubled eldest daughter Shanna. In this, the text thematically resonates with Shields' *Unless*, whose mother-writer is also preoccupied with her eldest daughter. Finally, concluding the chapter is Suzanne Buffam's *A Pillow Book* (2016), whose daughter she affectionately calls "Her Majesty" makes recurrent appearances throughout the collection. Buffam intersperses her maternal experience with her meditations on insomnia, the medieval Japanese tradition of Pillow Books and the genre's most celebrated author, Sei Shōnagon. While *A Pillow Book* is not exclusively or even predominantly about motherhood, the collection makes deliberately chosen space for the maternal voice.

Chapter Three, "'blood / children / milk': Feminist Articulations of the Maternal Body," ventures into another paradigm of maternal expression and creativity via the body. Alongside the developments in feminist theory and philosophy that privilege the body as a site of knowledge and power, such as the work of Cixous and Irigaray, a series of texts in Canadian literature also use maternal corporeality as a vehicle for exploring motherhood and embodied experiences of mothering. The discourse surrounding motherhood and creativity shifts here from spatiality and possibility into a more visceral and material reality. This chapter is exclusively focused on poetry, a genre Canadian poets have employed to great effect in exploring, expressing and articulating maternity through corporeality. The texts celebrate the maternal body for its sensuality and its life-giving and life-affirming capacities, and I argue that this unveiling of the previously silenced and elided corporeal element of motherhood is an act of radical feminist

---

vein, the majority of the texts I consider reflect the ongoing hegemony of heterosexual motherhood (with a handful of notable exceptions, such as Brossard's *These Our Mothers* and MacDonald's *Adult Onset*).

expression. The theoretical work of Margrit Shildrick, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva forms the theoretical framework for my analysis throughout.

The chapter begins with a brief return to the Canadian modernist era with the lyric poetry of Dorothy Livesay, whose poem "Serenade for Strings: for Peter" dates from the 1940s and provides a visceral rendering of the experience of giving birth.[14] The chapter then moves firmly into the era of the second-wave in Canada with Daphne Marlatt's 1980 collection, *What Matters: Writing 1968-70*, which consists of lyric and prose poetry that chronicle her disintegrating marriage, her pregnancy and the birth of her son, Kit. Marlatt experiments with both form and subject, particularly in her poem cycle "Rings," which details the environment of the womb and the experience of childbirth.[15] A consideration of Lola Lemire Tostevin's 1983 poetry collection, *Gyno-Text*, follows. *Gyno-Text* is a sparse, imagistic poem cycle that conjures the interiority of a woman's body through the three trimesters of pregnancy. With a microscopic focus on the female reproductive organs and the fetus blooming within, Tostevin enacts a radical defamiliarization and reconceptualization of the maternal through her magnification of life and motherhood at the physiological and cellular level. I then turn to Di Brandt's *mother, not mother* (1992), published almost ten years later, whose short lyrics focus on the corporeality of pregnancy and early motherhood.

---

[14] The rest of the texts studied in Chapter Three are published alongside the surge of second-wave feminism, but Livesay's early poems reveal the extent to which she was at the vanguard of poetic experimentation and expression, as well as the degree to which deep, discursive engagements with motherhood were beginning to surface in the modernist era.

[15] Like the work of many of Marlatt's literary contemporaries, her poems express the prevailing assumption among feminist writers that men and patriarchy are what must be cast aside in order to flourish creatively. Over the course of the collection, the speaker of Marlatt's poems, like the characters of Laurence, Munro, Atwood and Thomas's texts, leaves the man with whom she conceived her child, and begins a new life as a single mother. In fact, motherhood and the work of raising children, rather than being an encumbrance, becomes a source of inspiration, creativity and strength.

Temporally, the chapter then enters the twenty-first century with Su Croll's *Blood Mother* (2008), which is the first of a veritable flurry of poetry collections published in Canada between 2008 and 2013 that feature lyrics focusing on the experiences of birth and mothering young children. Croll's text makes explicit the bodily iterations of conception, pregnancy and birth, drawing on her experiences with her two young children. I then turn to Susan Holbrook's *Joy is So Exhausting* from 2009. The title comes from the final line in the final poem in the collection, "Nursery", which—following Holbrook's playful, postmodern experimentations with puns, pastiche, parody, transpositions and appropriations—is an extended meditation on motherhood which uses the alternation between left and right breasts while breastfeeding as a structuring principle. A consideration of Yi Mei Tsiang's *Sweet Devilry* (2011) follows, which features poems that focus on the exigencies of the reproductive, maternal body. Finally, the chapter concludes with Melanie Dennis Unrau's *Happiness Threads: The Unborn Poems* (2013), a collection of lyric poems that meditate on corporeal experiences of miscarriage, pregnancy, and birth in the age of the internet, exploring wordplay with online abbreviations frequently used in chatrooms and comment sections. Throughout, Unrau centres the mother and maternal subjectivity as she navigates the often bizarre online world of Mommy-blogs and motherhood in the twenty-first century.

As evidenced by the surge of maternal texts in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, Chapter Three reveals that not only is the mother-artist "possible," as in the novels and stories published during the height of second-wave feminism, but she is fiercely embodied and articulated in all her many iterations. The texts I consider in Chapter Three also reveal the extent to which not only can a poem's speaker or a novel's protagonist be a mother for some or part of the text, but that the materiality and corporeality of motherhood itself can be the central

preoccupation or motif. In the case of the poetry in particular, the maternal is more than just one of a variety of themes: it is the entirety of the text's subject itself. The mother-writer here is more than just a possibility; she is embodied, fully present, and unapologetically occupying visceral and literary space.

Chapter Four, "Matrifocality, Maternal Consciousness and the Radical Subjectivity of the Mother-Artist," captures another paradigm of the affirmation of the mother that has come to preoccupy the discourse of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Where the maternal has been traditionally silenced in both psychoanalysis and literature, from the 1990s into the present moment, the proliferation of literary texts that perform and embody maternal consciousness and experience reveal the extent to which the mother has finally moved to centre stage.[16] This chapter will draw heavily on Sara Ruddick concept of "maternal thinking," Daphne de Marneffe's elaboration of maternal desire and Andrea O'Reilly's theorization of empowered or feminist mothering, and its expression through "maternal communication" (Podnieks and O'Reilly 20). As Podnieks and O'Reilly argue, maternal communication "signals a matrilineal tradition" where "[m]others find *themselves* as mothers… engaging in dialogue with multiple facets of their own identities as they may or may not come to terms with their maternal roles, desires, and needs" (20). Furthermore, "[t]he theme of communication has informed maternal thinking, to use Ruddick's phrase, as well as maternal writing" (20). And while all the texts considered in my dissertation can be regarded as literary forms of maternal communication, the texts I explore in Chapter Four are the most centrally preoccupied with the subjectivity of the

[16] Anthologies and edited collections abound in the contemporary period, including texts such as *Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood,* edited by Shannon Cowan, Fiona Tinwei Lam and Cathy Stonehouse (2008), *Great Expectations: Twenty-Five True Stories about Childbirth* edited by Dede Crane and Lisa Moore (2008), the aforementioned *White Ink: Poems on Mothers and Motherhood* edited by Rishma Dunlop (2007), *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood* edited by Moyra Davey (2001) and *A Question of Balance: Artists and Writers on Motherhood* edited by Judith Pierce Rosenberg (1995).

mother-artist, as she occupies a central space in her own narrative and her motherhood is inextricable from either the themes or forms of the texts she has created. The final chapter also completes the journey from maternal-creative impossibility, to possibility/space, to corporeality, to interiority. These texts privilege the consciousness and subjectivity of the mother-artist, exploring her creativity, her conflicts and her experiences of mothering.

Chapter Four begins with an analysis of a lesser-known short story by Margaret Atwood entitled "Giving Birth" from 1977's *Dancing Girls and Other Stories*, a text which also plays with auto-fiction, narrative fragmentation and centres the maternal voice and experience. The chapter then transitions to a consideration of Nicole Brossard's *These Our Mothers: Or: The Disintegrating Chapter*, which first appeared in 1977 in French and was translated into English in 1983.[17] Brossard's boldly experimental text is defined by its attempts to write beyond or outside the boundaries of patriarchal language. *These Our Mothers* is also the earliest text in my dissertation that explores the theme of lesbian motherhood. My analysis of Brossard's ground- and form-breaking text is followed by a series of texts from the last decades of the twentieth-century, beginning with articulations of Black maternal subjectivity in Claire Harris's *Drawing Down a Daughter* from 1992, which explores interrelated themes of literary creativity and maternal procreativity through the mother-poet Patricia, who writes and dreams of her soon-to-be born daughter in an apartment in Calgary by the Bow River, while also exploring the ambiguities and dreams of the immigrant experience.

Into the twenty-first century, Fiona Tinwei Lam's *Enter the Chrysanthemum* (2009) centres the maternal voice in a collection of lyric poems which chronicle the exhaustion of life

[17] While this project focuses principally on Anglophone Canadian Literature, Brossard's *These Our Mothers* is a text whose subject matter and prevalence within the body of Canadian literary criticism in English make it a singular exception. I also acknowledge the text's unique Quebecois cultural context in the relevant sections of Chapter Four.

with a newborn, navigating single-motherhood, her evolving relationship with her mother and her East Asian matrilineage. Finally, Ann-Marie MacDonald's searing autofictional *Adult Onset* (2014) explores lesbian motherhood in the urban setting of Toronto and reveals how women experience motherhood beyond the realm of hetero-patriarchy. In the case of MacDonald's novel, her main protagonist Mary-Rose is a stay-at-home mother to two small children and a writer of successful children's books. She struggles with the binaries and conflicts that motherhood has introduced into her life and into her relationship with her partner Hilary.

My conclusion provides a holistic overview of the mother-artist in modern and contemporary Canadian literature, charting her transformation from conceptual impossibility to a radical, discursive presence through spatiality, corporeality and interiority. Importantly, I simultaneously incorporate an auto-theoretical consideration of my own experiences as a mother and writer (of this dissertation). I further argue against using the four themes or paradigms of impossibility/ possibility/ corporeality/ subjectivity as self-limited or mutually exclusive. As my dissertation reveals, many texts cross these boundaries, just as they also slip beyond any attempt to structure them in a strictly linear fashion. Livesay's oeuvre in particular breaks down any easy timeline or progression from one state to the next. However, as my dissertation progresses through the trajectory of Canadian literature by women, there are certain peaks that correlate to broader sociocultural trends related to feminist activism and visibility (for example, the greater number of texts that view the mother-artist as a possibility during the height of the second-wave, and the surge in the literary presence of texts which take the mother and motherhood as their central figure or preoccupation at the tail end of the third-wave).

My dissertation, in grasping the figure of the mother-artist in Canadian literature, also opens avenues of inquiry into patriarchal marriage and fatherhood. Notwithstanding the many

other modes of mothering, be it lesbian mothering or single mothering, that appear frequently in the texts I consider, heteronormative marriage and childrearing still retain their hegemony, both culturally and materially. The ways in which so many of the mother-figures in these modern and contemporary texts react and relate to their husbands and the fathers of their children opens up a correlate line of inquiry into the nature of fatherhood under patriarchy, and how the bearing and raising of children render marriage itself impossible for many of these mother-writers. In most instances, the women in heterosexual partnerships actually abandon their relationships and strike out on their own, or if they do remain together, domestic conflict seems sadly inevitable. The texts which envision a truly happy and harmonious marital partnership with children are notably few: Shields's *Unless* and Croll's *Blood Mother*. What, then, does fatherhood mean for men? And is there a distinct father-artist correlate in Canadian literature? If so, does he re-inscribe the trope of the mad artist, abandoning his family for his work, as the prevailing myths would have him do? These and other questions are generated by my dissertation, but remain beyond its scope.

Ultimately, my dissertation affirms the agency, authenticity and communication of the mother-artist, comingled with her absence as well, to paraphrase the four paradigms Podnieks and O'Reilly introduce with respect to their organization of maternal texts. I conclude that while the myth of the impossibility of the mother-artist persists discursively and thematically, even through the texts of the contemporary era, the mother-artist is ultimately a figure of radical potentiality and possibility. She explodes the well-established myths of the Romantic, masculine artist, and reveals her own motherhood to be a site of creative inspiration and literary productivity. Rather than functioning as a hindrance to her work, the mother-artist's

reproductivity adds richness, nuance and gravitas to her life and, most importantly, to her literary creations.

# Chapter One

## "No-one's mother": The Impossibility of the Mother-Artist

In a 2016 interview with German newspaper *Tagesspiegel,* world-renowned performance artist Marina Abramović reveals that she has had three abortions during her lifetime,

> because I was certain [children] would be a disaster for my work. One only has limited energy in the body, and I would have had to divide it… In my opinion that's the reason why women aren't as successful as men in the art world. There's plenty of talented women. Why do men take over the important positions? It's simple. Love, family, children – a woman doesn't want to sacrifice all of that. (qtd. in Puglise n.pag.)

As I mention in the Introduction, Virginia Woolf articulates a similar sentiment more than ninety years earlier in *A Room of One's Own*, wherein she speculates on the reasons for the relative paucity of artistic output by female writers in Western European history. The apparent practical and emotional impossibility of combining motherhood and artistic practice, or the expectation of this impossibility, has clearly persisted for generations. This apparent conflict between artistic practice and child-bearing has a multiplicity of origins, from the historical, political and economic oppression of women under patriarchy more generally, to socio-cultural conceptions of women as mothers (or potential mothers) to the exclusion of all other activities or identities, and to Romantic, masculine conceptions of the artist as inevitably autonomous, individualist and solitary. Grace Stewart locates the beginnings of these masculine constructions of the artist in Faustian myths wherein "men strive restlessly, search incessantly for knowledge, experience lust, lust for experience, attempt Byronic ascents toward upper realms and courageous descents to earthly or oceanic caverns, and generally become embroiled in alchemic, magical, political, economic and literary stews" (*A New Mythos* 12). In contrast, in these same archetypal myths,

"[f]emales embody motherhood, purity, fear of experience, domesticity, selflessness, and the status quo. They are nymphs, goddesses, and witches or wenches confined to the kitchen" (12). Christine Battersby remarks that "Romanticism… developed a phraseology of cultural apartheid… with women amongst the categories counted as not-fully-human. The genius was a male—full of 'virile' energy—who *transcended* his biology" whereas women were "condemned… to cultural and biological inferiority" (3). She asserts that the ideology of "Romanticism turned the artist into a demi-god: the genius. Woman, by contrast, became simply 'Other'" and was supposedly preoccupied with "procreative and domestic duties that would take all [her] (limited) energy" (6). Battersby reveals the extent to which "our modern notions of creativity are modelled on notions of a male God creating the universe, and the devious tricks used to represent all creative and procreative power as the attribute of males" (8).

Countless examples of *kunstlerromane* about male artists affirm this mythology, the most famous example of which is James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), in reference to which I have taken part of my dissertation title. In 2016, a *New York Times* book review titled "Are Domestic Responsibilities at Odds With Becoming a Great Artist?" observed that "[t]he idea of the great, undomesticated artist is… one of the enduring fictions handed down to us by the industrial age" (Deb and Stevens n.pag.) and that even in the contemporary moment, when images of the artist are conjured, "One thinks of the Romantics, of bohemianism, of Baudelaire sleeping late into the morning" (n.pag.). The existence of female artists disrupts and complicates this mythology; historically and culturally, women have largely been permitted entry into the artistic pantheon only if they sacrificed their reproductive lives and domestic investment—either remaining single or at the very least, remaining childless. Suzanne Juhasz likewise observes that "To be a woman poet in our society is a double-bind situation… For the

words ‘woman’ and ‘poet’ denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles” (1). The double-bind thus provides the woman-artist with a fundamentally impossible choice, characterized by “conflict and strain… Traditionally, the poet is a man, and ‘poetry’ is the poems that men write. The long history of Western literature makes this point painfully clear. It is men who make art, who make books; women make babies” (1). G.B. Stewart makes a similar argument, noting that “Whereas the male artist can identify with traditional mythic heroes without jeopardizing his self-image or his sexual identity, the female artist is burdened by the heritage of patriarchal myths in a society which arbitrarily excludes her from various experiences” (“Mother” 127). A 2016 article by Eti Wade also makes a similar assertion, writing that “it is possible to perceive that material motherhood is incompatible with the metaphorical giving birth to art. In other words, one can be a mother to a child or create works of art, but doing both is perceived to be incompatible; motherhood and art practice are not easily reconciled” (247).

Canadian writers have likewise articulated the untenable conflict between creativity and maternity over the same period. In “The Three Emilys” (1953) Dorothy Livesay questions how her own motherhood interferes with her artistic practice when contrasted with the childless freedom she envisions for Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson and Emily Carr. Contemporaneously, Anne Wilkinson also articulates the division between the creative and the maternal in her 1955 poem “Lens.” Even more recently, Canadian Nobel Prize laureate Alice Munro reveals in a 1994 interview with *The Paris Review* that “I was writing desperately all the time I was pregnant because I thought I would never be able to write afterwards” (qtd. in McCulloch and Simpson n.pag). And Suzanne Buffam’s 2016 poetry collection, *A Pillow Book*, includes an untitled prose poem that recounts a meeting with a male literary editor from New York who inquires about the

speaker's reproductive life: "Did I have any children, he wanted to know. He was famous for not mincing words. I'd just turned thirty-five and had none. Good, he said firmly. You'll be finished if you do" (45).[18] The idea that motherhood and artistic practice are irredeemably incompatible clearly crosses national and cultural borders, finding a unique expression in modern and contemporary Canadian literature. This chapter will explore the apparent paradox of the mother-artist and the conceptual (and sometimes literal) impossibility of combining maternity and artistic creativity through a feminist and maternal literary analysis of a selection of poetry by modernist poets Dorothy Livesay and Anne Wilkinson, and contemporary fiction by Alice Munro and Katherine Govier. Their texts capture the first of the four paradigms of the mother-artist, that of its inherent impossibility by virtue of the dominant Romantic mythology of the artist as "hero" (Battersby 14), defined by "*male* reason, *male* fantasies and *male* sexual energies as the norms for creativity" (106), confronting the prevailing ideology of patriarchal motherhood, which insists on a woman's selfless devotion to her children and the necessary sublimation of her own autonomy, desires and ambitions. The texts in this chapter focus on and magnify this irreconcilable conflict and, by virtue of the time periods they span—from 1947 to 2012—the pernicious persistence of both Romantic mythologies of the male artist and the oppressions of patriarchal motherhood.

[18] In another prose-poem, Buffam recalls a list of the greatest books ever written, compiled by Mortimer Adler, "co-founder of the Great Books Foundation and the Great Books of the Western World program" at the university where her husband teaches. She notes that "Among the five hundred and eleven Great Books on Adler's list, updated in 1990 to appease his quibbling critics, moreover, only four, I can't help counting, were written by women—Viriginia, Willa, Jane, and George—none of whom, as far as I can discover, were anyone's mother" (Buffam 22). And as I explore in the opening paragraphs of the Introduction, Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* explores similar anxieties and fears about combining motherhood and a literary vocation.

**Dorothy Livesay: Poet, Mother, Vanguard**

Dorothy Livesay was among Canada's most prominent modernist poets, and at the vanguard of women writers exploring and articulating the experience of being a North American woman in the mid-twentieth century. As the daughter of two journalist parents (her mother also published poetry under a pseudonym), Livesay was exposed early in her life to the world of print publishing, and credits her parents for encouraging her literary creativity, and getting her first collection of poems published when she was only nineteen (Beardsley and Sullivan n.pag.). Her body of work spans six decades, including 21 volumes of poetry, three memoirs, and a posthumously released collection of previously unpublished poems. Throughout her long career, Livesay's creative and poetic preoccupations shift from imagism to Marxism, from fraught heterosexual and marital love, to feminism and lesbianism. Her poetry spans a range of subjects and themes, from workers' rights to her own experience of abortion, from a rich exploration of her evolving sexuality to the conflicts she felt between marital and maternal obligations and her creative impulse, to celebrating the wonder and fragility of the natural world, and marvelling at the beauty of her children and grandchildren. As Nadine McInnis notes, "Livesay was formed by all the richness and ferment of the twentieth century." (101). Furthermore, "it is her [female] sex which has most dramatically and constantly influenced her struggles as an artist" (101). Paul Denham concurs, observing that Livesay displays a "continuing preoccupation with the distinctive qualities and problems of women as artists" (*Dorothy* 34). And of her consistent engagement with women's experiences and perspectives, Susan Gingell remarks that Livesay is "[a]n important foremother to contemporary Canadian feminist poets" (4).

While the Marxist and material feminist politics inherent in her oeuvre have been well-documented and extensively explored, less critical attention has been paid to her maternal poetry,

and the particular conflicts that are engendered when a woman dares to be not only a writer, but a mother at the same time. As Diane Relke notes, "As a feminist and the daughter of a woman poet, Livesay observed at first hand the ways in which social and literary conventions deny women literary authority" (6). And having both witnessed and experienced "the conflict between poetic and female identities… Livesay chose to turn the tension between her two roles into a source of poetic energy" (6). In fact, Livesay is unique in that she was the first in Canada to take up, as a poetic subject, the paradoxes and conflicts inherent to being both a mother and an artist simultaneously. A series of poems published in the late 1940s and early 1950s, "The Mother," "The Three Emilys," and "The Door," and one from her archives dating from the 1970s, "Three Kingdoms: For Charlotte Brontë," capture the essence of the mother-artist as a conceptual impossibility or as generative of profound and untenable conflict.

"The Mother," from *Poems for People* (1947), was composed and published while Livesay's two children were still quite young (her son and daughter were born in 1940 and 1942 respectively). Of the poems written during this period of her life, Livesay reflects, "When raising the children, although I appreciated being a mother, I didn't like housework and I felt frustrated because I couldn't find enough time to write" (qtd. in Barber 19). "The Mother" meditates on the loss of autonomy and independence that seems inherent to maternity, and the necessary sublimation of selfhood that the work of mothering requires. The poem begins: "She cannot walk alone. Must set her pace / To the slow count of grasses, butterflies, / To puppy's leap, the new bulldozer's wheeze" (Livesay *CP* 161). The mother is not only unable to find solitude and be "alone," but she is also unable to walk at her own pace. She must adjust herself to the curiosity and slow exploration of children encountering the world for the first time. The details upon which the speaker meditates are focused on the natural world—grass, butterflies, puppies—and

other, more typically masculine construction work with the "bulldozer" (161). She is trapped amongst children and nature, a biological essentialism that is contrasted against the more obvious productivity of men working around her, who are also drawing the attention of her child, further impeding her walk. The next stanza begins, "She cannot think alone. Words must be /Poised to the smaller scope, immediates / Of wagon's broken wheel, a battered knee" (161). The erasure of autonomy envisioned by Livesay is more than merely physical; the poem's mother is also unable to "think alone," the children's needs and observations penetrating her interiority and subjectivity. Her perspective is inevitably focused on the minutiae, the "immediates" of broken toys and the child's minor injuries. As I note in the Introduction, Mielle Chandler theorizes this particular type of inter-relational maternal experience, suggesting "that 'mother' is best understood as a verb, as something one does, a practice which creates one's identity as intertwined, interconnected and in-relation" (273).[19]

Indeed, the rest of the poem features motifs of restrictive bonds, knots and confinement, even in the quiet hours of evening: "when the active hours are gone, it's still / Her lot to busily bestir herself / With knots and nooses" (Livesay *CP* 161). The mother's confinement is finalized "[w]hen evening's seal is set" (161), but it is a self-imposed entrapment, as "she must / Have chosen here to stay" (161). The element of real choice is undermined, however, by the obligatory nature of the term "must" that precedes it. Paul Denham notes that this particular "ambiguous phrase" embodies "[t]he paradoxical nature of the mother's function," wherein "[h]aving chosen freely, she has no choice; 'must,' strategically placed… suggests both a lack of doubt and

---

[19] Chandler goes on to reflect that

> To be a mother is to enact mothering. It is a multifaceted and everchanging yet painfully repetitive performance which although, like 'woman,' involves the way one walks, talks, postures, [and] dresses, … orients these activities directly and instrumentally in-relation to and with the walking, talking, posturing, dressing, undressing… of another who, due to a relation of near-complete interdependence, is not separate. (273-274)

compulsion" ("Lyric" 100). Likewise, McInnis notes that an "undercurrent of powerlessness begins to creep… into Livesay's poems at about the same time as she begins to write about maternity" (40).[20] Livesay's mother-persona is estranged from her own thoughts and actions, while bound to her children and their needs, in a bondage that is apparently freely chosen, but with an undercurrent of ambivalence. Relke notes that "Child-rearing demands a sacrifice of adult identity: the mother must curb her pace and her tongue to accommodate the child. The centre of the mother's universe must shift to reflect the child's perception of the world and its activities; the child demands that his/her interest be the mother's interest. Only one individual in a mother-child relationship is permitted personal growth: the mother's growth is on hold" (20). And yet the mother here embraces her sacrifice and remains at her children's sides to lull them to sleep: "To soothe the small lids down to drowsiness / Till childhood sleep perfumes the darkened room" (Livesay *CP* 161).

"The Door," from the same time period (published for the first time in her *Collected Poems* and with a composition date somewhere between 1948-53), appears to pick up precisely where "The Mother" leaves off, both spatially and conceptually. It is now nightfall, the child is sleeping, and the maternal speaker finds herself alone at last: "When the house snaps out its lights / Shrouds hallways in diagonal dark … / And drowsy child is set adrift" (Livesay *CP* 203). It is finally time for her to gather herself, as "O then, then only / From the parched day a fugitive / I bow, drink deep from the well of silence formed" (203). When the children are asleep, that is when the mother persona is finally able to reunite with and rediscover herself. She describes herself as a "fugitive," escaping the binds and confines explored in "The Mother," and being left

[20] Furthermore, "[o]ne aspect of motherhood which seems particularly problematic in the poems… is the isolation of the grown woman who is left solely responsible for the nurturance of young children" (McInnis 40). McInnis highlights the extent to which the persona of "The Mother" "becomes estranged from her own thoughts, words, and patterns because she has 'chosen here to stay'" (40-1).

thirsty and "parched," relishing the silence of night. This solitude and darkness is in stark contrast to "the blaze where doubt and indecision / Hold and halt" (203) during the daylight hours. Instead, she is finally able to quench her thirst and refresh her soul, able to "reach out for flowing waves / Of wall" (203). It is noteworthy that the mother remains enclosed within the house, even as she imagines the walls transforming into water so that she can "open a shadow door—and lo! / I leap, I run—swiftly to meet myself" (203). While there is no literal escape from the confines of domesticity, there is an imaginative release in the walls transforming into water and a secret door to pass through wherein she can experience a re-encounter with the self.[21] While the artistic impulse may not be explicitly addressed in the poem itself, there are salient parallels with Livesay's 1991 memoir, *Journey with My Selves*, where she reflects on her life as a young mother in the 1940s:

> The war and having children changed all my perspectives: from being a participant in the struggle for a better world I became an observer. All community efforts narrowed down to that of the home. Yes, I was still writing poems, time snatched in the basement supervising an old washing machine with hand wringer, or waiting until everyone was asleep to put on a record and write to music. (174)

This excerpt from Livesay's memoir contextualizes both "The Mother" and "The Door" as expressing two sides of the same problem; how to be both an attentive mother, sensitive to her children's needs while coping with the dissolution of her autonomy in the face of their

[21] Susan Zimmerman's oft-cited 1974 article, "Livesay's Houses," notes Livesay's preoccupation with homes and gardens as sites of female identity. As she observes, "the identity of woman has always been tied to the home. A home, generally speaking, is a house with a wife and mother inside it" (32). Zimmerman argues that a great deal of Livesay's poetry grapples with and expresses the tension between a woman's desire to get married and raise children, and her longing for freedom and autonomy (32). Denham also concurs, observing that in "The Door," "domesticity is more unambiguously a burden on creative freedom" ("Lyric" 100).

dependence, and a productive artist, eking out space, time and solitude to cultivate a responsive and creative identity for herself.[22]

"The Three Emilys" is contemporaneous with both "The Mother" and "The Door," appearing in *The Canadian Forum* in 1953 (Lecker and David 150) and in her *Collected Poems* alongside the other two poems in an eponymously titled section, "The Faces of Emily." In the poem's title and in the subtitle from the *Collected Poems*, "Emily" is shorthand for those female artists Livesay idealizes—namely Emily Carr, Emily Dickinson, and Emily Brontë, as she indicates in a footnote—who exemplify complete artistic freedom, unencumbered as they are by either husbands or children. While Livesay opens the poem with an apparent lament for these women's loneliness, "These women crying in my head / Walk alone, uncomforted" (Livesay *CP* 202), by the second stanza, she celebrates their complete creative liberation: "they had liberty! / Their kingdom was the sky" and "They batted clouds with easy hand, / Found a mountain for their stand" (202).[23] Livesay envisions perfect artistic freedom in precise terms, exalting the solitude and autonomy of the creative impulse, set against the backdrop of a natural landscape: "From wandering lonely they could catch / The inner magic of a heath— / A lake their palette" (Livesay *CP* 202). They are able to transform nature into an instrument for their artistry, as "any tree / Their brush could be" (Livesay *CP* 202). Beyond the Emilys' freedom and autonomy, their childlessness is central to their identity as artists. After all, as Stewart also notes, the traditional idealization of the artist in masculine terms means that "the procreative, other-directed, and

---

[22] These challenges were defining features of Livesay's everyday life during this period of time, as critics have noted. Lee Briscoe Thompson observes that during the 1940s and 1950s, Livesay's domestic responsibilities "cut to a trickle the number of poems and articles [she] was able to complete and publish in this period. The birth of a son, Peter, and a daughter, Marcia, increased for a time the difficulties of full concentration on creative writing" (4).
[23] As I note in the Introduction to the chapter, Grace Stewart traces this archetypal artist-figure to Faustian, masculine ideals, where the artist is commonly viewed as experientially-inspired, pleasure-seeking, self-involved and, above all, alone and unencumbered (*A New Mythos* 14).

nourishing role of woman is antithetical to the role of the artist" (*A New Mythos* 14). In fact, Livesay positions these three women artists in a largely male paradigm: "I, born to hear their inner storm / Of separate man in woman's form" (Livesay *CP* 202). She suggests that at the heart of these three women is, in fact, a type of masculinity in the guise of a woman. Livesay, however, acknowledges the rich experiences that marriage and maternity offer her: "I yet possess another kingdom, barred / To them, these three, this Emily" (202). Her experiences of the world are mediated through her maternity, as she reveals that "I move as mother in a frame, My arteries / Flow the immemorial way / Towards the child, the man" (202). As eternal as this "kingdom" of motherhood may be, it is worth noting that she is confined "in a frame" as a mother, and she is only permitted entry into the artistic life periodically: "And only for brief span / Am I an Emily on mountain snows / And one of these" (202). This position is analogous to her persona in "The Door," who rushes to meet herself once the children are asleep, and Livesay herself, as she recalled squeezing in time to write in the basement after everyone was asleep. In a 1979 article, she describes her life with young children as follows: "during the forties and fifties I devoted myself to family life, to setting up playschools, to joining the PTA… and to writing poetry in what spare time I could find" (Livesay "At the Back" 37).[24] Ultimately, "The Three Emilys" clearly privileges and idealizes the unencumbered artist's life, unrestrained by marriage or motherhood. While the poem opens with the tears and laments of the Emilys, by the end of the poem, it is Livesay's persona who is discontented, as she decides that "the whole that I possess / Is still much less" (*CP* 202). The Emilys continue to "move triumphant through my head" and ultimately, "I am the one / Uncomforted" (202). When asked by Marsha Barber in a 1979

[24] Peter Stevens observes similarly that "Livesay was busy at this time looking after her home and children, and must have been inspired to think about the difficulties women writers experience as a result of the domestic role imposed upon them" (54).

interview whether the persona in "The Three Emilys" represents Livesay's views on the ideal artist's life without a spouse or children, Livesay acknowledges her pleasure in raising her children, but her dislike of housework and her frustration at having no time to write: "I thought, well, at least those women artists were absolutely free from all these ties. I envied them" (qtd. in Barber 19).

Livesay revisited the theme of the impossibility of the mother-artist in a much later poem, "Three Kingdoms (for Charlotte Brontë)," unpublished during her lifetime but included in Dean Irvine's *Archive for Our Times*, a compilation of Livesay's previously uncollected and unpublished work. Among her drafts and manuscripts from the 1970s is a lyric meditation on the life and death of Charlotte Brontë who, "having borne books, / given birth to so many creative flights," decided to get married and ultimately died in childbirth along with her unborn baby (Livesay *Archive* 203). Livesay critiques Brontë's two-part decision (marriage and motherhood) as "a fatal thing," to have "turned away at forty / to be Victorian, / to be married" (203). The "turning away" is ostensibly from literature and creativity, from all the books she wrote, having "given birth to so many creative flights, / wrestling with angels" (203). For Livesay, this is apparently an either/or decision that Brontë has made; the poem's speaker indicates that women have faced such choices throughout history, into the contemporary era: "It is given to women to choose, / even in our time" (203). But as it turns out, this choice leaves women with a series of impossibilities, as they are unable to simultaneously have marriage, children and artistic careers, since "there are not three kingdoms. / She may have two / but never three" (203). The poem does not develop any kind of rationale for this reality, simply observing that this is the way things have always been and continue to be. Of course, Brontë did not live beyond childbirth and died literally in the act of becoming a mother, so the certain demise of her career had she lived

remains purely speculative. Nonetheless, Livesay uses Brontë's fatal childbearing as a metaphor for the impossibility of the mother-artist. In marrying and becoming a mother, Brontë necessarily sacrificed the artist (herself) through her physical death. The timing of the poem in Livesay's career is also interesting; at the height of her career, widowed, with her children by now grown-up, exploring her sexuality and sensuality, Livesay remained preoccupied with the conflicts engendered by marriage, children and creativity. Her assertion that women can have two out of the three components is interesting (suggesting as it does that children and art are possible, provided there is no patriarchal husband to interfere; or that one could have a marriage and art, but without the extra burden of children; or finally, marriage and children, provided one sacrifices or sublimates their creativity entirely).

This perspective is certainly echoed in Livesay's memoir, *Journey with My Selves,* wherein she reflects, "By the early fifties I began to see that I would have to plan for a life of my own after the children were educated" (189). And upon hearing about her husband's sudden death, her first thought is "I'm free… I'm free" (196). Reflecting on this life-altering loss, Livesay writes, "I had worn four hoods: childhood, girlhood, womanhood and motherhood. Now there were two more waiting: widowhood and selfhood" (197). It is clear that these two elements of her life (her children and her husband), however beloved (though she wrote and spoke candidly about her marital disharmony), were obstacles to her creative self-actualization. It is also interesting to note that her "selfhood" is something she is only able to explore and embody *after* her children are grown and her husband is dead. Rather than finding her fundamental self in any of these other roles and identities, it is only once these impediments are removed that she is able to truly be herself, express her creativity and devote herself to her artistry, a fact certainly

borne out by her impressive publishing and literary activity in the last four decades of her life.

**The Lenses of Anne Wilkinson**

Born into affluence in the early twentieth century, Anne Wilkinson was by no means a prolific poet, having published only two collections in her lifetime, but her work defies its paucity of quantity by occupying significant cultural space in the study of Canadian literary modernism. Dean Irvine, in his 2003 edited collection, *Heresies: The Complete Poems of Anne Wilkinson*, notes that her work "maintain[s] currency" and that "[h]er poetry's engagement with political, social, and gender issues has retained its efficacy and, in fact, is gaining relevance" (19). Critics have been sporadically engaging with Wilkinson's *Counterpoint to Sleep* (1951) and *The Hangman Ties the Holly* (1955) since the 1970s, focusing on the various dichotomies, paradoxes and binaries that characterize her work, from Robert Lecker's 1978 assertion that Wilkinson's "attempt to seize the instant forces [her] into an awareness of that same instant's passing" (n.pag.) to Kathy Mezei's 2005 observation that "her poetry at times appears to waver between… the everyday and the decorative" (160). One of the most fundamental of dichotomies that emerges in Wilkinson's work is her grappling with being both a poet and a woman, two identities which occasionally appear to come into conflict in her texts. Irvine characterizes this binary as a "dialectic of the maternal 'woman's eye' and the poetic 'working eye'" which "generates her distinctive vision of a gendered poetics" (20), however I would like to suggest that this dialectic is never truly reconciled for Wilkinson, and furthermore, that the apparent failings of her "woman's eye" are bound inexorably to the maternal, and the impossibility of successfully reconciling motherhood and the artistic impulse.

As Joan Coldwell notes in her introduction to *The Tightrope Walker: Autobiographical Writings of Anne Wilkinson* (1992), "Wilkinson did not begin to write poetry seriously until she was in her mid-thirties, when writing had to compete for attention with the care of her husband and their three young children" (viii). And while her economic privilege meant she did not have to preoccupy herself with the drudgeries of everyday domestic life—as Kathy Mezei notes, "Servants carried out domestic chores and minded her children, giving her the time and space and privacy for reading and writing denied most of her contemporary women writers" (168)—her poetry yet remains preoccupied with the curious tension between maternal duty and the creative impulse, reinforcing the view that they are mutually exclusive. As Coldwell observes, "Although [Wilkinson] belonged to a wealthy family where there were always servants to smooth the household way, she nevertheless experienced that conflict between the demands of motherhood and the demands of art so often experienced by less financially privileged women" (viii).

These observations are confirmed through an examination of Wilkinson's journal entries from the late 1940s to the early 1950s, where she repeatedly ruminates on her sense of inner turmoil or conflict between occupying her socially expected role of devoted wife and selfless mother to her desire to retreat into her world of books, poetry and creativity. In October 1948, she writes, "The days romp by with such a racket I've no time or quiet to write in my journal. In all the bustle I can't hear my unborn poems" (Wilkinson *Tightrope* 27). In referring to her "unborn poems," she frames her literary vocation in reproductive terms, a trope that recurs in the work of countless writers, both male and female. It is yet more noteworthy because it is the bustle, "romp" and "racket" of her own children which prevent her from giving metaphoric birth to her creative work. This rendering of her poetry as unborn children is also set in opposition to

her actual, living children, the one necessarily precluding the other. In a similar vein, in November of the same year, she reflects, "When I write I renounce all close human relationships—I am away, away, and only half-conscious of the people I love. I have come back, after a long journey. How long will I stay? It is better for my family when I bury the poet" (28). For Wilkinson, the division between her poetic vocation and her mothering is definitively sharp. Human relationships must be "renounced," and she is "away, away," insisting on the necessity for a stark loneliness and disconnectedness in order to write. These times she disappears from her family life are rendered as "long journ[ies]" from which she must inevitably return. But even then, there is always the reality of her having to eventually leave again, contained within her rhetorical question, "How long will I stay?" Ultimately, she feels that her literary vocation is detrimental to her family life, asserting that it is "better for my family when I bury the poet" (28). That the poet must be nullified and interred in order to protect the well-being of Wilkinson's family is not questioned, reaffirming the impossibility of the figure of the mother-artist.[25]

In an entry from March 1950, Wilkinson writes, "Woman's position in the world, even in the modern world, is remarkably inelastic. If she acquires an interest, cultivates a talent outside husband, children and house, she automatically is subject to the qualms of divided loyalties" (65). These "divided loyalties" become even more acute if the woman is driven by an artistic impulse, to create art. Wilkinson writes, in October 1951, "I wish I was a woman with female

[25] The constraints Wilkinson feels on her creativity and the imposition on the space and time she needs to devote to her craft appear to emanate directly from her being a woman; in a journal entry from December, she laments, "Woman are hemmed in from birth—and in varying degrees acclimatize. They are hemmed in by their bodies, their function as mothers and, in the middle class, by circumstance" (30). She explicitly identifies two specific sources of limitations: women's bodies and motherhood. She draws attention to women's biology and reproductivity as sources of oppression, an imprisonment to which women are forced to acclimatize throughout their lives. While Wilkinson's journal entry predates the publication of *The Second Sex* by approximately one year, there are striking similarities with de Beauvoir's assertion that "One of the basic problems for women… is reconciling the reproductive role and productive work. The fundamental reason that woman, since the beginning of history, has been consigned to domestic labour and prohibited from taking part in shaping the world is her enslavement to the generative function (Beauvoir 136).

interests, a woman with a genius for making a home and soothing a man, instead of a creature with a passion for hieroglyphics" (96). But of course, the "hieroglyphics" of learning Greek and writing poetry are only an aberrant fascination because of her gender; a man (even with children) would encounter no such qualms.[26] As such, Wilkinson finds herself in an impossible double-bind, since she cannot conceive of herself *not* writing poetry. As she writes in December 1953, "I feel complete collapse of personality *unless* I am an artist with a real contribution to make" (113). By this point, she has published her first full length collection, *A Counterpoint to Sleep*, but she still views her creative vocation in largely masculinist terms.[27] She feels profoundly alienated from the social and personal expectations placed upon her as a wife and mother, and instead relishes "the glorious stir and excitement when I am creating and the discipline imposed by the struggling poem" (113). And when she achieves success in her artistic endeavour, she feels a communion with all other artists and creators who are, curiously, almost all male: "To write a good poem is to achieve a kind of brotherhood with all the poets of all the ages who have written good poems, a brotherhood with musicians and painters etc. etc. and for the same reason – and with carpenters and cabinet makers and gardeners, with all men and women who are lit with the love of their craft" (113). Notwithstanding her almost incidental inclusion of the phrase "and women" at the end of her celebratory passage, she refers to this ideal, imagined artistic community in the strictly masculine terms of a "brotherhood." It is also striking that beyond the male poets, musicians and painters, the other occupations with which she finds affinity as an artist—carpenters, cabinet makers, gardeners—were almost exclusively the purview of men as

[26] As she reflects earlier that same year, in July 1951, "A male artist finds a woman who will worship him and his art. He has a chance. A female artist is a trial and tribulation to her relations and friends" (94).
[27] Of the concomitant dissolution of her marriage, she writes, "As a wife I abdicated… I have no faith in my female nature, in the compartment of life where womanly intuition tells us the moment for submission and directs us into a thousand domestic niceties" (113).

well. In contrast with her "womanly" work as a wife and mother, the work of creativity is envisioned as inescapably masculine.

Wilkinson is certainly not alone in her correlation of masculinity with the idealized figure of the artist; this perspective has its roots in both patriarchy and Romantic mythologies of the creative impulse. As Christine Battersby notes, "[w]e still associate the great artist with certain (male) personality-types, certain (male) social roles, and certain kinds of (male) energies. Women who want to create must still manipulate aesthetic concepts taken from a mythology and biology that were profoundly anti-female. Similarly, the achievements of women who have managed to create are obscured by an ideology that associates cultural achievement with the activities of males" (23). Margaret Homans likewise observes that "the major literary tradition normatively identifies the figure of the poet as masculine, and voice as a masculine property" (3). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar concur, noting that "the patriarchal notion that the writer 'fathers' his text just as God fathered the world is and has been all-pervasive in Western literary civilization" (4). Furthermore, "[i]n patriarchal Western culture… the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis" (6).[28] In a specifically Canadian context, Wendy Keitner observes in a 1984 article that "the convention of the poet as male, his speech Adamic, and the speaking voice of lyric poetry [as] masculine has persisted right up to the contemporary period in Canadian literature as well" (77).

To write as a woman prior to the advent of 1970s second-wave feminism—which began to formulate a liberationist means forward for female artists—inevitably necessitates writing against this vast masculine artistic canon, since "the literary tradition betrays a masculine point

[28] As I note in the Introduction, Marianne Hirsch develops a similar argument in *The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989).

of view that is oppressive to women" (Homans 9). Wilkinson is certainly not alone in struggling with the impossible dichotomy between being a woman and aspiring also to be a poet in the mid-twentieth century since, "like most women in patriarchal society, the woman writer does experience her gender as a painful obstacle, or even a debilitating inadequacy" (Gilbert and Gubar 50). Beyond the preponderance of male writers, masculine subjectivity is predicated on the constructed 'otherness' of the feminine. As Homans writes, "[w]here the masculine self dominates and internalizes otherness, that other is frequently identified as feminine, whether she is nature, the representation of human woman, or some phantom of desire. Although this tradition culminates in Romantic poetry, it originates in the Bible" (12). Furthermore, "woman's otherness [is] reinforced [through]… her exclusion from a traditional identification of the speaking subject as male" (12). And of course, "[w]ithout subjectivity, women are incapable of self-representation, the fundamental of masculine creativity" (17). So how did women writers cope with these patriarchal, masculinist obstacles to their creative lives? Keitner argues that "up until mid [twentieth] century, the most highly regarded Canadian women poets, like their British and American counterparts, typically strove to write like men, adapting their viewpoint—whatever the loss and distortion—to masculinist literary convention" (77). This was the result of the tendency of woman poets to "internaliz[e] and indeed perpetuat[e] [an] anti-female bias" (79). Keitner further suggests that these literary adaptations take the form of "denial, distortion, or self-contradiction on the part of the female poet-persona" (77). And in the case of Wilkinson's work, it takes the form of a particular kind of "distancing, splitting, or doubling" (78).

The impossibility of reconciling being a woman and mother with her poetic ambitions is poignantly explored in one of Wilkinson's most celebrated and anthologized poems, "Lens," from *The Hangman Ties the Holly* (1955). Keitner argues that the poem's main subject is

"woman's submission to an aesthetic which equates the 'manly' qualities of vigor, terseness, and supposed translucency with the essence of poetry itself" (80). Furthermore, she states that the poem "focusses on the split between Wilkinson's personal identity as 'woman' and her professional identity as 'poet.'" (80). However, I argue that this conflict is even more pronounced, as Wilkinson's "woman's eye … veiled with milk" is specifically maternal. In that sense, the poem also meditates on the conflicts of the mother-artist and the psychic difficulty of occupying this split identity. "Lens" begins with its female persona affirming her poetic ethos: "The poet's daily chore / Is my long duty" (Wilkinson *Heresies* 82). Part of this duty is "To keep and cherish my good lens" attuned to "love and war / And wasps about the lilies / And mutiny within" (82). The quotidian craft of writing is something the persona commits herself to, caring for her "good lens" which we will shortly discover is specifically masculine and muscular. The scope of her poetic vision incorporates human passion, struggle and suffering—"love and war"—and nature's bounty in the "wasps about the lilies" (82). There is a sign of internal strife at the end of the stanza, though, with her "mutiny within" (82). The reader soon discovers that this mutiny is the result of a divided subjectivity, prefigured through the poet's pair of distinctly gendered eyes—one female and one male.

The second stanza begins, "My woman's eye is weak / And veiled with milk" (82), equating femininity with weakness and suggesting that motherhood further obscures the poet's vision. The milk is sustenance for the child, but an obstacle which the mother-artist has difficulty seeing beyond. In contrast, though, "My working eye is muscled / With a curious tension, / Stretched and open" (82-83). The muscular, masculine eye is "curious" and "open," able and eager to take in all of life "As the eyes of children" (83). The invocation of the child here is important also, as it rejects a maternal subjectivity in exchange for the child's viewpoint. This

seems to belie Elizabeth Ann Potvin's assertion in her 1992 doctoral dissertation that "[t]he mother is at the centre of [Wilkinson's] work" (52), as in this instance, the mother is clearly antithetical to the artist. The masculine poet's eye is "Trusting in its vision" regardless of the mystical or unusual things it encounters, such as "The holy holy spirit gambol / Counterheadwise, / Lithe and warm as any animal" (83).It is a visionary ability that is clear and receptive, as "The poet's eye is crystal, / Polished to accept the negative" (83). In contrast, the female eye is unseeing, as "My woman's iris circles / A blind pupil" (83). The milk-veiled maternal eye progresses to complete blindness, juxtaposed against the now photographic precision of the male poetic gaze.[29] The second half of the poem is then devoted to this photographic, masculine exactitude, and the speaker's poetic process is likened to a photographer developing film: "In my dark room the years / Lie in solution, / Develop film by film" (83). This distillation of imagery from lived experience, caught inert on the page, happens "Slow at first and dim / Their shadows bite / On the fine white pulp of paper" (83).

The poem then concludes with death and the inevitability of mortality: "And death… / Lands on steely points, a dancer / Discipline to the foolscap stage" (84). Here, death is rendered both as an artist in the form of a dancer, and as art itself as poetry on the page. But most central is the specifically male figure of death as the dancer, artist, and art: "The property of poets / Who command his robes, expose / His moving likeness on the page" (84). Wilkinson's firm dismissal of her maternal and female gender identities as impediments to artistic creation is ultimately reinforced by the concluding image of the male figure of the dancer, whose gender and finality

[29] The fourth stanza elaborates further on the metaphor of the camera and photograph: "The shutter, oiled and smooth / Clicks on the grace of heroes / Or on some bestial act" (83). The subject matter here is also rendered as explicitly masculine, focused as it is on the "grace of heroes," echoing Battersby's assertion that the artistic genius "is always a 'Hero', and never a heroine" (14).

reveals the extent to which "we still operate within the broad framework of Romantic assumptions about creativity" (Battersby 5).

**Fables of the (Failed) Mother-Artist: Katherine Govier**

Canadian fiction writer Katherine Govier published her first short-story collection, *Fables of Brunswick Avenue,* in 1985, consisting of sixteen distinct stories, one of which, "The Night-tender," deals explicitly with the conflicts inherent to combining motherhood and a creative life. Further highlighting the preoccupation with motherhood that punctuates the collection, the twentieth anniversary edition from 2005 includes a postscript section with a biography, an author interview and supplementary essays by Govier, including "What Really Happens to Your Life When You Have a Baby?" which is excerpted from an earlier, 1984 essay from *Homemaker's* magazine. In the "Interview with Katherine Govier," when asked about the various mothers and mothers-to-be that populate the collection, and if/how her feelings have shifted in the two decades since the book's original publication, she remarks, "Of the young mothers I think, Yes, I remember: it all does feel like a shock when it begins—the weight of other lives on yours, the assumptions that motherhood brings, the limitations, the vulnerability. But it is the best thing I ever did. It stretched me in every way" (Govier *Postscript* 8). The blurring of boundaries between her fictional mother characters and her own experiences as a mother while writing the stories is noteworthy, and reveals a preoccupation with capturing the unique and difficult aspects of motherhood that she herself experienced as a writer and a mother to young children. She also retrospectively affirms the importance of her motherhood, in her assertion that it was "the best thing [she] ever did" and that it "stretched [her] in every way" (8).

In "What Really Happens to Your Life When You Have a Baby?" Govier outlines a morning that begins by giving her infant daughter a bottle at 4:30 am, sleepily playing with

blocks with her toddler son, changing wet sheets from the children's beds, serving breakfast, dealing with tantrums, arranging for dishwasher repairs, buying diapers and calling the pediatrician for an appointment (*Postscript* 14). Her relief from this maternal onslaught comes in the form of the nanny at 9 am, when she is able to escape to her home office to write: "At nine o'clock, with the nanny in charge, I fled upstairs to my office. What I really wanted to do was lie down and go back to sleep, but I didn't. I put in a morning of typing, had lunch with a friend, worked some more, did my errands, and came back at 5:30 pm to a chaotic house and two fussy kids who wanted their mother" (14-15). Her casual dismissal of her work as a writer as mere "typing" functions as a subtle, self-protective disavowal of her artistic identity, even though in the following paragraph she boldly states: "I am a writer. I write novels and magazine articles. I teach creative writing one day a week and am adapting my latest book for the stage. I have worked for eight years to get to this point in my profession, making an investment of time and emotion that I hope will prove worthwhile in years to come" (15). And yet, as Govier recalls the early years of her literary career, she gestures to her refusal to interrupt this trajectory of success, even after the arrival of her children. She remarks, "Writing, like most serious work, cannot be set aside for half-a-dozen years without pretty serious losses. It needs not only time, but energy. It is a lonely, frustrating, fantastically rewarding kind of work—much like motherhood, in fact" (15). She openly conflates mothering with writing, and ultimately vows to do both simultaneously, despite the significant personal costs: "I never intended to exchange one for the other, nor will I. However, sometimes I feel I will explode with the effort of trying to do both" (15). Of the particular practical and material challenges of being both a mother and a writer, and the discrepancies between common expectations and lived realities, Govier reflects,

> Writing is the sort of work people assume goes well with having children. You have flexible hours, people like to say, you can work at home! True, I can take an afternoon off to go to the doctor with my infant, and I do, but that simply becomes a half day when I don't get anything done, and deadlines, personal or by outside contractors, don't go away. True, I can work at home, but that means when I am working I am still available for domestic emergencies, which happen several times a day. True, I don't have to take time travelling to my office, but let me tell you about the stress points of my day, the many times I have climbed the stairs to my study leaving a toddler wailing for his mummy, my spine stiffening with the effort not to go back down. (15-16)

And while Govier clearly manages to occupy both a creative and a maternal role in her lived experience, embodying within herself the *possibility* of the mother-artist, the stories of *Fables of Brunswick Avenue* often work to unearth the darker conflicts that underpin these particular choices. In many instances, despite her own personal success at managing the difficult balance between mothering and writing, for Govier's characters, the mother-artist figure is a conceptual impossibility.

"The Night-tender" chronicles a newly formed friendship between Ellen, a tenured academic and writer who is accompanying an older, eminent, "long-lost poet," Hannah Winters, to a "government-sponsored conference on women writers" in Edinburgh, Scotland (Govier *Fables* 169).[30] Tasked with chaperoning and introducing the elderly, alcoholic poet at the conference, Ellen is forced to confront her disillusionment with a female literary figure she had

[30] According to Rosemary Sullivan, Govier was inspired to write "The Night-tender" by her own personal and professional encounters with Elizabeth Smart in the early 1980s when Smart was invited to be Writer-in-Residence at the University of Alberta in Edmonton and spent time touring a new edition of her book in Toronto (Sullivan 369). Elizabeth Smart, author of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, was herself a single mother to four children.

long admired and respected, and to face her own fears about the prospect of motherhood and reckon with the effect it had on Hannah's career. At dinner before the conference, Ellen grasps the extent of Hannah's age and frailty, and the bodily consequences of a difficult life: "As [Hannah] drew another cigarette from the package, her hands shook. The calloused and tobacco-stained fingers, like some root vegetable freshly pulled from the earth and scrubbed raw, were of such compelling reality that between them the cigarette was white and thin, a phantom" (172). Ellen feels disillusioned by "the physical reality" of Hannah, which "took over from and vanquished the imaginary writer she'd worshipped. This was Hannah, who had spent her life feeding children, washing, planting, with no man to help. For the first time she wondered if Hannah had had to make things so hard for herself" (172). The attention to Hannah's physical fragility, her cigarette-stained hands that shake, shatters the idealized vision of the poet that Ellen had unwittingly cultivated. Instead, she is a woman "who had spent her life feeding children, washing, planting, with no man to help" (172). The consequences of these difficult choices are made manifest in Hannah's physicality. Ellen is also inwardly critical of Hannah, blaming her for her own difficulties, while reckoning for the first time with the apparent material costs of Hannah's having been a "woman who had raised, decades earlier, such a bold clamour for the emancipation of her sex" through her writing (168).

Confronted with the depth of Hannah's pain and loneliness, though, Ellen begins to doubt the value of Hannah's feminist struggles. Reflecting on the night before, when she stayed over at Hannah's cottage, while the conversation was at times luminous, the evening deteriorated along with Hannah's increasing intoxication: "there had been an incomprehensible outburst at an unnamed faithless lover and… more raging. Finally Ellen had had to push her up the stairs to bed. All of this had been frightening, and yet the worst had been after, during the night, when the

awful sounds had come from Hannah's room—jumbled shouts and bellows like an animal in pain" (173-4). Hannah, as the figure of the mother-artist, is a tormented, lonely alcoholic. And yet, Ellen confesses her desire for children to her, unclear even herself what kind of validation or advice she seeks, suddenly blurting out, "I'm thinking of having children" (174). Hannah's paradoxical reply reveals both her own desire for children, and her lingering ambivalence towards motherhood: "Don't do anything until you have to… Let life take you by storm… I wanted to be taken over, possessed. I wanted children to swarm over the bed" (174). She relishes the wild abandon of children usurping her life, and yet her warning to not jump in until she feels urgently compelled gestures towards a desire to delay the onslaught of children. Ellen resists the idea that she would ever "have to" do anything: "Have to?... That doesn't happen anymore. I don't know what you mean" (174). The narrator explains, "Nothing was going to take her by storm. [Her boyfriend] James, perhaps, but only when she permitted him to" (174). Hannah identifies and highlights Ellen's hesitation and fear, retorting, "Perhaps you should find out… It would do your writing good" (174). Hannah suggests that Ellen's deficiencies as a writer would be addressed by allowing for more of life's passions and surprises, including children.

However, Hannah also laments her meagre artistic output, which she blames on having had children. Hannah remarks, "I was the first one out… Before me all the women writers had no children. I wanted to see if it could be done" (175). When Ellen presses her, asking, "And you're living proof?" Hannah wryly lifts her purse "into which she'd packed the two thin volumes of poetry. That was all" (175). She then responds, "I always said I'd get back to it" (175). So while Hannah *did* successfully publish two slim collections, she insinuates that had she not had children, the existing texts may have been longer and more fulsome, and there could or should have been more.

After Hannah's reading and reception, which the narrator concedes "had been filled with fans of Hannah's and was a great success for her" (175), she and Ellen are walking back to their hotel together when Hannah is overcome with a fit of drunken insecurity: "Suddenly Hannah dropped on her side to the grass, which was thick with little pearls of condensation. She rolled as if suffering from cramp" (176). She pulls out all the pins that are holding her hair in place, "shaking her head until the thick youthful strands sprang up" and then worries aloud, "they were pulling my leg, weren't they? They were" (176). Still lying on the grass, reflecting on the questions she was asked, she muses, "What do they want with me? Why do they ask about my life? I have no advice" (176). Ellen replies, "You said you were the first one out" (176), though the narrator then concedes, "Of this Ellen herself was not convinced; all night in the back of her mind she had been composing a list of other women writers of Hannah's time who'd had children. But this was not the time to argue" (176-77). Ellen continues, "They want to know how you do it. They want to know… why it stopped" (177). To this, Hannah only mutters, "Feminists and scholars… Such terrible people" (177).

The two women return to the hotel to find that the eponymous, overnight "Night-tender" machine in the lounge is not working, so after scaring away the other occupants of the lounge with their loud and angry attempts to get it operational again, they order drinks from the ornery receptionist and resume talking. Hannah remarks that men must be afraid of Ellen, to which Ellen indignantly retorts, "They are not!... James isn't" (182). When Hannah inquires whether Ellen's boyfriend James wants children, she replies, "He does if I do," but then the narrative reveals that her defensive reply to Hannah is, in fact, a lie: "That was not exactly true. In fact James had said that he could not imagine having children with Ellen and that Ellen was not the sort of woman any man would be willing to settle down with. He had said that Ellen was the sort

of woman men had as a mistress. They had quarrelled bitterly over this, and Ellen did not even know if, when she got back home, they would see one another again" (182). Not only has Hannah probed far too close to the truth with her observations of Ellen's character and life, but the narrator reveals that Ellen's primary romantic relationship may have indeed ended because of these very issues. Perhaps inferring the truth of the situation, Hannah cautions her ominously,

> 'You can't have it all.'
>
> 'You had it.'
>
> 'Oh no, I did not. I certainly did not.'
>
> 'Men, books, children. Success.' Although of the last, Ellen was somewhat uncertain.
>
> Before she met Hannah she'd have said it, but up close, things were not so clear. (182)

Ellen's first or distant impressions of Hannah as a woman artist who managed to acquire and sustain the apparent trifecta of female literary success—"Men, books, children"—do not hold up to closer, more intimate scrutiny. In fact, the portrait of the elderly, alcoholic, lonely and tormented Hannah is a harrowing and sobering reality-check to Ellen's idealistic veneration of the older poet. Ironically, the story presents Hannah as having *none* of those three things now that she is nearing the end of her life: she has no partner, her children are grown and gone, and her "books" consist of two modest collections of poetry. She was neither a prolific writer nor successful in finding lasting love.

Nonetheless, she tries to console Ellen as they finish their drinks: "You'll do it all. You'll be able to slip through. If it's not James, then another" (183). Hannah then drunkenly stands up, "stumbling in her loose shoes," and announces, "I do have something to say. I just couldn't say it there, tonight, in front of those people… What I have to say is this. It is impossible to be a woman writer, impossible because of the need for man. You see… the cock is unable to rise up

in face of woman's words" (183). Then, the narrator observes, "She drew her glass to the side of her nose. 'The feminist speaks,' she concluded and laughed" (183).[31] Ellen inwardly resists Hannah's declaration that "[i]t is impossible to be a woman writer" because "the cock is unable to rise up in face of woman's words" (183), but cannot bring herself to argue the point: "Ellen slowly pulled herself to her feet and, holding her glass against her lip, made ready to answer. The remark had to be debated, surely. She couldn't let it stand. And yet, she couldn't muster the strength to argue. 'That's bullshit,' she said impotently. Hannah laughed again" (183-4). The women bid each other goodnight and Hannah goes to her room while Ellen remains in the lounge a little longer. She sees aspects of herself mirrored in Hannah: the literary ambition, the bitterness, the difficulty with men. But Ellen remains determined not to fall victim to a similar fate, even while the narrative may be suggesting a certain ironic impossibility in her vows: "Ellen growled suddenly with pain and pressed her fists against her eyes… But she'd made her decision. She would hide her own despair, and half the time she would forget that it was there.

---

[31] Viewed through the lens of feminist achievement and equality in the literary arts, what is it about the figure of the female artist that is so apparently threatening to Hannah's past partners? Susan Faludi is preoccupied with similar dynamics in *Backlash* (1991), when she wonders, "what exactly is it about women's equality that even its slightest shadow threatens to erase male identity? What is it about the way we frame manhood that, even today, it still depends so on 'feminine' dependence for its survival?" (79). Her hypothesis is that men establish their masculinity on their success at providing for their families, and that the feminist quest for economic freedom and equality threatens men's dominant financial capacities (79). But in a relatively non-lucrative creative context, where the woman's vocation is artistic or literary, it seems this conflict has less to do with economics and more to do with how artistic identity is socially and culturally constructed. As Battersby notes of the enduring Romantic notions of genius and creativity, "the achievements of women who have managed to create [art] are obscured by an ideology that associates cultural achievement with the activities of males" (23). And furthermore, encoded within this Romantic ideology is the fundamental unnaturalness of a woman writer: "A woman can have a powerful imagination only by being unsexed: by being a freak of nature" (79). By extension, a woman of Hannah's generation would still be perceived as taking on a masculine role by taking up the pen and daring to be an artist, a subjectivity that would have been perceived as uniquely threatening to men without the strongest of egos. And certainly the biographical details of the lives of writers such as Margaret Laurence, Daphne Marlatt, Audrey Thomas and Alice Munro suggest that combining an artist's life with traditional, heterosexual marriage is often rife with difficulty and conflict. So while the particular details of Hannah's life remain obscure, Govier seems to be capturing a prevailing sentiment among women writers that their vocation is prone to engender discomfort and unease among their male romantic partners.

The baby issue could wait, too; she would use the summer to get some poems done. And if, as Hannah said, it wasn't James, then it would be someone else" (185). Whether the poems, the baby, or the "someone else" ever materialize is simply left to conjecture; the narrative ends there, refusing closure or reassurance, but offering a glimmer of hope nonetheless.

**Alice Munro's Impossible Mother-Artist and "To Reach Japan"**

Munro's short stories are frequently preoccupied with the multifaceted and divergent needs and desires of her female protagonists. As Joseph Gold remarks, Munro "explores the schizophrenia… which afflicts the educated woman who seriously seeks to be a genuine self, a creative person, a loving female, a mother, a writer, an actress, a teacher" (12). Though Gold made these observations in 1984, they are equally applicable to Munro's 2012 story, "To Reach Japan." The narrative centres on Greta, a newly published, emergent poet who is married to the respectable but hapless Peter, and mother to two-year-old Katy. The story begins with Greta and Katy leaving on a train to Toronto, a literal and metaphoric journey away from Peter, who is left behind in Vancouver for the summer. Though Munro is not specific about the year the story is set in, it is ostensibly the early 1960s, since the reader is informed that "feminism" was not yet "okay," and in fact, that "feminism was not even a word people used" (A. Munro 6). Furthermore, "[i]n the decade they had already entered but that [Greta] at least had not taken much notice of, there was going to be a lot of attention paid to… [g]oing with the flow, Giving" and that "Barriers between the inside and outside of your head were to be trampled down. Authenticity required it" (20). The timeframe for Munro's story is then just prior to the explosion of second-wave feminism, and Greta is part of the generation of North American women that

Betty Friedan imagined trapped in their domestic servitude as not-so-happy housewives, lying in the dark next to their husbands, collectively asking themselves, "Is this all?" (Friedan 1).

Greta is a blossoming poet who is struggling to be taken seriously (and to take herself seriously) as a writer among her husband's family and friends, while also apparently hiding her artistic vocation from her own social circle. The narrator remarks that "Peter's mother and the people he worked with—those who knew about it—still said poetess" (A. Munro 6). However, Greta "had trained [Peter] not to" (5-6). Besides this correction of her husband's sexist terminology, there is "[o]therwise, no training necessary. The relatives she had left behind in her life, and the people she knew now in her role as a housewife and mother, did not have to be trained because they knew nothing about this peculiarity" (6). Greta is admittedly ambivalent about her "peculiar" vocation, and sometimes mobilizes sexist paradigms to obscure her own feelings of vulnerability, noting that "if you were writing poetry it was somewhat safer to be a woman than a man. That was where the word poetess came in handy, like a web of spun sugar" (6).

Thanks to the recent publication of two of Greta's poems in the fictional Toronto magazine *The Echo Answers*, she is invited to a party in Vancouver by the magazine's editor, to which she takes a long bus ride, and has to walk to while "wearing high heels which slowed her down considerably. Also her most sophisticated black dress, zipped up at the back and skimming the waist and always a little too tight at the hips. It made her look somewhat ridiculous, she thought, as she stumbled slightly, along the curving streets with no sidewalks, the only person about in the waning afternoon" (7-8). The difficulty in accessing the party and Greta's feelings of physical and sartorial awkwardness as she arrives at the party are in fact metaphorical

representations of how she is received and how out of place she feels among the cool strangers in this literary circle. She rings the doorbell twice and is

> greeted by a woman who seemed to have been expecting somebody else. Greeted was the wrong word—the woman opened the door and Greta said that this must be where they were having the party.
>
> 'What does it look like?' the woman said, and leaned on the doorframe. The way was barred till she—Greta—said, 'May I come in?' and then there was a movement that seemed to cause considerable pain. She didn't ask Greta to follow her but Greta did anyway. (8)

At the party, "nobody spoke to her or noticed her," but she soon begins drinking sweet cocktails to drown her social isolation: "Nobody looked at her with any recognition or pleasure and why should they? People's eyes slid round her and then they went on with their conversations. They laughed. Everybody but Greta was equipped with friends, jokes, half-secrets, everybody appeared to have found somebody to welcome them" (8-9). Eventually, Greta sits down on the floor in the hallway, thoroughly drunk, and is approached by Harris, who turns out to be the son-in-law of the hosts, who offers to drive her home. This seemingly innocuous ride home spurs months of sexual and romantic fantasies for Greta, after Harris confesses to wanting to kiss her on the ride home, but ultimately chooses against it (13). And while Greta and her daughter Katy are going to Toronto to housesit for a friend for a month while Peter will be working in the north of British Columbia, the trip also holds within it the possibility of seeing Harris again, since Greta takes the chance of sending him a letter to his work with the simple lyric: "Writing this letter is like putting a note in a bottle— / And hoping / It will reach Japan" (14), and including only "the day of her arrival and the time of the train, after the bit about the bottle" (15). She does

not include any more personal or potentially incriminating details, in the event that his wife encounters it, having been recently released from a psychiatric hospital. And in an interesting and not insignificant twist, her self-indulgent daydreams of Harris entirely supersede her creative drive: "And what about her poetry? Not a line, not a word. Not a hint that she had ever cared for it" (14). It is noteworthy that this confusion or blurring of boundaries between extramarital sexual transgression and the artistic impulse returns later in the narrative, with meaningful connotations for Munro's mother-artist, Greta.

As it turns out, the three day, cross-country train ride that Greta hopes will lead her into Harris's arms in Toronto offers more occasion for adulterous adventures, when she meets Greg, a children's performer who ingratiates himself with Katy and with whom Greta finds herself embroiled in intimate conversation one afternoon while Katy sleeps: "she and Greg were drinking while all this anguished but also somewhat comforting talk went on. He had produced a bottle of ouzo. She was fairly cautious with it… but some effect was there. Enough that they began to stroke each other's hands and then to engage in some kissing and fondling. All of which had to go on beside the body of the sleeping child" (22). They ultimately decide to continue their amorous embraces in Greg's berth in the next car over, while Katy is still asleep: "they arranged whatever clothing had been disarranged, slipped out of the compartment, carefully fastened every button of the berth where Katy was sleeping, and with a certain fancy nonchalance made their way from Greta's car to his" (22-23). After consummating their relationship, Greta hurries back to her berth right away, feeling "weak, shocked, but buoyant, like some gladiator—she actually thought this out and smiled at it—after a session in the arena" (23). However, much to her horror, she reaches her berth and discovers that "[t]he bottom fastener of the curtain was undone" even though "[s]he was sure she remembered fastening it" (23) and that Katy has

disappeared. Greta panics and begins frantically searching for her daughter, while mentally castigating herself for her neglect: "Greta could barely move. Her whole body, her mind, emptied. This could not have happened. Go back, go back, to before she went with Greg. Stop there. Stop" (24). She begins tearing open the surrounding compartments, and finally finds Katy in the passage between the cars, where "there was a short walkway where you were actually walking over the place where the cars joined up. There you could feel the train's motion in a sudden and alarming way…And there, between the cars, on one of those continually noisy sheets of metal—there sat Katy. Eyes wide open and mouth slightly open, amazed and alone. Not crying at all, but when she saw her mother she started" (25).

Greta picks her up and takes her back to their berth, wrapping her in a blanket before "she herself began to shake, as if she had a fever. She felt sick, and actually tasted vomit in her throat" (26). Katy pushes her away and tells her, "You smell a bad smell" (26). Greta thinks through all the possible scenarios that could have happened had she not found Katy between the cars, and tries to reassure herself that "someone would have found Katy, surely. Some decent person, not an evil person, would have spotted her there and carried her to where it was safe" (26). Notwithstanding Greta's attempts at self-soothing rationalization, she feels a profound sense of guilt and shame for her neglect of her daughter, a neglect which she begins to frame as being not simply momentary, but a long-standing, chronic inattention. Penitent, she vows to focus all of her attention on Katy for the rest of the journey: "All of her waking time for these hundreds of miles has been devoted to Katy. She knew that such devotion on her part had never shown itself before. It was true that she had cared for the child, dressed her, fed her, talked to her, during those hours when they were together and Peter was at work. But Greta had other things to do

around the house then, and her attention had been spasmodic, her tenderness often tactical" (28). Greta also begins to interpret her artistic vocation as interfering with her love for her child:

> And not just because of the housework. Other thoughts had crowded the child out. Even before the useless, exhausting, idiotic preoccupation with the man in Toronto, there was the other work, the work of poetry that it seemed she had been doing in her head for most of her life. That struck her now as another traitorous business—to Katy, to Peter, to life. And now, because of the picture in her head of Katy alone, Katy sitting there amid the metal clatter between the cars—that was something else she, Katy's mother, was going to have to give up. (28)

Through the lens of her guilt, Greta now views her poetry as "traitorous" to her daughter and husband, to life itself, and cannot conceive how the two impulses could ever coexist. Instead, her preoccupation with her writing "crowded the child out" and left no space for her family. The only solution Greta can conjure is to "give up" her literary ambition. Finally, she concludes that it was, "A sin. She had given her attention elsewhere. Determined, foraging attention to something other than the child. A sin" (28). Greta's self-condemnation leads her to the conclusion that she must ultimately make a choice between her child or her art, and she appears determined to choose her maternal role over her creative ambitions. Greta thus embodies the impossibility of the mother-artist, unable to reconcile the two roles and apparently compelled to choose between them.

The necessity of this division between selfhood and motherhood is reinforced in the final scene of the narrative, when Greta and Katy step off the train in Toronto and Harris is waiting for them. As he picks up their suitcase, he "[t]ook hold of it, took hold of Greta, and kissed her for the first time, in a determined and celebratory way… First a shock, then a tumbling in Greta's

insides, an immense settling" (29). And while Greta tries to keep a hold on her daughter while enjoying this illicit kiss, she is unable to do so: "She was trying to hang on to Katy but at this moment the child pulled away and got her hand free. She didn't try to escape. She just stood waiting for whatever had to come next" (29). While Katy does not run away or disappear, the disconnection symbolized in the broken hand-holding at this moment indicates that Greta is unable to both maintain emotional contact with her daughter while also satisfying her own desires. Greta is torn between her desire for self-actualization and self-fulfilment, whether symbolized in her artistic vocation or her sexual freedom, and her maternal duty to her daughter. That the child patiently waits for whatever comes next does not promise any reconciliation between Greta's apparently divergent desires, but also does not foreclose on any future happiness. Katy's patience for whatever will follow offers no clear resolution, and allows the impossibility of Greta's situation to hover uncomfortably in the reader's imagination.

**The Emergence of the Mother-Artist: From Impossibility to Imaginability**

In *Wild Mother Dancing* (1993), Di Brandt laments the absence and invisibility of mothers in the Western literary tradition, despite their obvious and essential importance in the fabric of human existence (5). She suggests that this imaginative absence of the mother is "because the maternal, à la Neumann, Freud, Lacan, Jung, is unspeakable, unrepresentable, unconscious" and that "in order to tell the mother story, in order to make a place for it, you must effectively challenge the master narrative of Western history, which is to say, there isn't room for the mother as subject in the Western conception of narrative as it now stands" (6). To approach this apparent conceptual void as a mother-writer necessitates a grappling with the paradoxical nature of this particular subject position, namely that your own subjectivity is one

that has not been historically possible or permissible. The first articulations of a previously unexplored creative and intellectual space are by their very nature hesitant, conflicted and often preoccupied with their supposed impossibility, as evidenced by the texts explored above.

Dorothy Livesay and Anne Wilkinson were two of Canada's modernist poets that grappled with their split identities as mothers and writers in some of their most celebrated poems. In fact, in the case of Livesay, she was among the first female Canadian poets (if not, in fact, *the* first) to broach the subject of motherhood and the personal conflicts it engendered for her as a creative, independent woman. Wilkinson's poems and memoirs explored similar preoccupations with how to navigate between the creative, inner world of the poet and the quotidian, practical and emotional expectations of motherhood. Alice Munro, perhaps the most commercially and critically successful Canadian writer of those under consideration in this chapter, also grappled with the struggles and impossibilities faced by women who dare to cultivate an autonomous, creative life while mothering their children. Likewise, Katherine Govier conjures artist figures for whom motherhood presents significant and untenable obstacles.

Of course, it is a testament to these bold mother-writers that we have these texts to consider at all. Undaunted by the traditional, maternal silence into which they began to write, they forged ahead to capture something of the tenuous and exquisite experience of mothering small children, and also of its difficulties, sacrifices and pain. And even while these writers contemplated the impossibilities of their material and psychological circumstances as mother-artists, in doing so they opened up literary spaces within which a previously inarticulable maternal subjectivity could begin to be expressed. As I demonstrate in the following chapter, the impossibility of the mother-artist eventually (and sometimes simultaneously) gives way to the myriad possibilities of the mother-artist, opening up literary space for the maternal. This space is

both imaginative and material, in the characters, narratives and images that begin to proliferate in texts from the 1970s onwards, and in the increasing numbers of women writers who are also mothers, who are able to carve out physical and intellectual space for their work. As feminists resist and refuse patriarchal conceptions of the artist (and woman), the figure of the mother-artist is no longer paradoxical and impossible, but rather, imaginable, possible, and actual.

## Chapter Two

## "All I want is everything": Maternal Space and the Possibilities of the Mother-Artist

Notwithstanding the conflicts and difficulties of combining motherhood with an artistic vocation, as elucidated in Chapter One, the figure of the mother-artist also retains her inherent possibilities simply by virtue of existing in the first place. From the earliest decades of Canadian literature in the nineteenth-century, women have both mothered and written. As Margaret Laurence has observed, "In Canada, women who were writers as well as wives and mothers have an honourable tradition" (*Dance* 136). Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, and L.M. Montgomery were all mothers in addition to being writers, after all. And in the modernist and contemporary eras, Livesay, Wilkinson, Munro, and Govier, who so eloquently illustrated and articulated the conceptual paradoxes and impossibilities of the mother-artist, were all themselves both writers and mothers. Laurence once again concurs, reflecting that "Almost all the Canadian women writers of my generation, and indeed of a generation younger, have married and borne children" (130). Clearly the conflict between the roles of mother and writer is not *so* untenable as to entirely preclude the possibility of writing while also mothering one's children. While many of these mother-writers may have chafed against the constraints motherhood sometimes placed on their time and energy, and occasionally felt guilty about their apparently divided devotion to their artistic practice (as explored in the previous chapter), the fact is that they somehow managed to carve out the necessary time and space to think, to write, and to publish (however compromised they may have felt their efforts to sometimes have been). In other words, they are able to cultivate a literal and conceptual space whereby artistic and creative practice can

somehow coexist with maternal and procreative roles.[32] Furthermore, beyond the quotidian logistics of mothering and writing, the maternal emerges to take up more and more space *within* the content and form of their texts themselves, particularly in the 1970s and onward. Not only is it possible to be a mother and an artist, but the veil begins to be lifted on motherhood as a subject in its own right; Canadian writers begin to write the mother into literary being, exploring the meaning and nature of mothering within their work. Thus a particular and important maternal space begins to open, not only in the writers' actual lives, but within their poetry and fiction as well.

**The Burgeoning Possibilities of the Mother-Artist**

In "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse," Susan Stanford Friedman reflects on the dominant expectations and understanding of what it means to be a woman with a literary vocation, reflecting that women's artistic identity is defined by a "patriarchally imposed, essential… binary system that conceives woman and writer, motherhood and authorhood, babies and books, as mutually exclusive" (65-66). However, Suzanne Juhasz, writing at the nadir of second-wave feminism in the mid-1970s, affirms that women writers are determinedly battling to destroy this "double-bind" of being both a woman and a writer; more to the point, she insists that feminist writers are highlighting the ways in which being a woman and a writer can be mutually conducive rather than contradictory, each an inherent function of the other (4). For Juhasz, it is not just the fact of women's writing that is important to dismantle this destructive binary thinking about gender and artistry, but the subject

[32] In "Women's Time," (1981), Kristeva observes that "we have seen in the past few years an increasing number of women who not only consider their maternity compatible with their professional life or their feminist involvement… but also find it indispensable to their discovery, not of the plenitude, but of the complexity of the female experience, with all that this complexity comprises in joy and pain" (30).

matter of that writing is of equal significance. Specifically, she highlights writing that draws on personal, female experience as an important political and distinctly feminist tool to break through the impossibility of the double-bind into new territory: "the personal and the political unite… in the need to validate the personal and the private as legitimate topics for public speech and in the need to integrate the private and public worlds" (5). Later she continues, "Writing… from personal experience, feminine experience is an act both necessary and vital to the revolution that is occurring" (177) and that "the need to integrate the private and the public is particularly feminist" (178). Similarly, Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes that the figure of the female artist in *kunstlerromane* by women writers is "a literary motif [that] dramatizes and heightens the already-present contradiction in bourgeois ideology between the [masculine] ideals of striving, improvement, and visible public works, and the feminine version of that formula: passivity… and invisible private acts" (84). And as Emily Jeremiah articulates, this binary between the public and the private is never more pronounced than when the female writer in question is also a mother: "The idea of a maternal writing is troublesome because it unsettles many of the oppositions upon which motherhood in western culture has historically rested, such as that between maternity and creativity" (7). More radically, "[m]aternal writing entails a publicizing of maternal experience, and it subverts the traditional notion of the mother as an instinctual, purely corporeal being" (7). Furthermore, "The idea of mothering as not only compatible with art, but also as conducive to it, constitutes a strategy of subversion" (10-11). The maternal and distinctly feminist figure of the mother-artist refuses and resists not only masculine ideals of creativity as requiring isolation and autonomy, but also patriarchal conceptions of motherhood. The prior, sharp delineations between 'woman' and 'artist,' and more to the point, 'mother' and 'artist,' begin to dissolve in the women's writing that emerges during second-wave feminism. As

Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy argue, post-1970s women's writing "resist[s] binary logic, particularly the injunction to either mother or write, in order to assert the value of *both* procreation *and* creation" (5). In order to explode these binaries, "[t]o insist upon a dialogic (both/and) rather than a monologic (either/or) subject, these mother/writers must simultaneously disrupt narratives that silence mothers and invent a different notion of character, or subjectivity" (5). In this vein, Alicia Ostriker suggests that motherhood is in fact advantageous for the woman artist, as "it puts her in immediate and inescapable contact with the sources of life, death, beauty, growth, [and] corruption" (159).

According to Ostriker, the mother-writer occupies a privileged place in the continuum of human existence, her motherhood having provided access to a source of wisdom unique to maternal experience. Julia Kristeva similarly reflects that "far from contradicting creativity (as the existentialist myth would still have us believe), maternity as such can favour a certain kind of female creation… at least in so far as it lifts fixations, and circulates passion between life and death, self and other, culture and nature, singularity and ethics, narcissism and self-denial. Maternity… always succeeds in connecting up heterogeneous sites" ("A New Type" 298). However, as many writers have noted over the past century, and as I explore in Chapter One, the material constraints and difficulties of combining motherhood with a creative vocation are not negligible. As Andrea O'Reilly observes, "mothering, particularly in the relationality of maternal subjectivity, may foster or inspire creative expression" while at the same time, "the work of mothering may simultaneously frustrate or inhibit the expression of this creativity" ("Foreword" xi).[33] However, the desire and need to return to creativity is a common thread through all of these texts of mother-artists. In her 2016 memoir, *This is Happy*, Camilla Gibb expresses her driving

[33] For example, in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, painter-protagonist Elaine recalls that "For the first year after [daughter] Sarah was born I didn't paint at all" (362).

need to write as inextricable from living itself, despite being lost in the throes of postpartum depression. She quotes Joan Didion, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," and then reflects, "I had an obligation to live; motherhood takes away any other option. And writing is the only way I know how" (130). She continues, "A red notebook lay to one side of me every night, a swaddled baby on the other. I believed that if I could find words, I could be a human again. And if I could be a human again, perhaps I could be a mother" (130-131). Gibb's struggle to recapture her fundamental (creative) self is echoed by Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly, who suggest that "motherhood abruptly repositions women in a space between self and family where it is a perpetual struggle to find a balance between nurturing others and fulfilling the self" (21).

In their 2005 edited collection, *Motherhood and Space*, Sarah Hardy and Caroline Wiedmer explain that "theories of space… have shifted from a static, flat understanding of space to a sense of space as increasingly dynamic, complex, interrelated, and emergent. While our thinking about space has become more complex, so too have the spaces contemporary Western mothers negotiate in their daily lives" (3). Furthermore, space is not simply material, but rather discursive as well, an understanding which requires us to "expand our sense of space to include not just material spaces but discursive fields whose logic impacts the arrangements in which mothers find themselves" (8). And furthermore, space—whether material or discursive—is always linked with time: "Space… can never be that completed simultaneity in which all interconnections have been established, in which everywhere is already (and at that moment unchangeably) linked to everywhere else. There are always loose ends in space. It is always integrally time-space" (8). Accepting that space is perpetually in flux and potentially contested, the spaces in which mothers care for their children can also be expanded and modified in order to allow for creativity and artistic practice, collapsing the literal and conceptual divisions between

'artist' and 'mother.' In fact, as I will argue in this chapter, in order to return to their creative lives, new artist-mothers must transform their time and space in order to successfully practice their craft. They accomplish this through various mobilizations and demarcations of maternal space, in such a way that this space is transformed into or doubled as a creative space, either in the presence of or (more usually) the temporary absence of children. In all instances, the mother-artist is able to resume or continue her artistic life while concurrently mothering her children.

In a more general, sociohistorical and Canadian literary context, the increasing prominence of mother-writers and texts that feature mothers as central protagonists through the 1970s and into the present can be interpreted as a discursive opening of maternal space within literature itself. It is more than a matter of increasing numbers of women who simultaneously write and mother (though that is a significant element), but that they also quite literally write mothers into the literary discourse as well through their creative texts and their protagonists. O'Reilly remarks that "the maternal kunstlerroman… is the truly radical, or more accurately transformative, narrative of female artistry in that the mother-artist courageously and imaginatively finds voice, and creates, in and through the very act that culture dictates should silence and efface her, namely her motherhood" ("Foreword" xiv). Prominent texts that are published in Canada from the 1940s through to the present that feature protagonists who are mothers and artists, and that I consider in this chapter, include selections from Dorothy Livesay's ground-breaking, modernist maternal poetry of the 1940s, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974) with writer-mother Morag, Audrey Thomas's *Intertidal Life* (1984) with writer-mother Alice, Sharon Thesen's "Marine Life, 1970" in *The Beginning of the Long Dash* (1987), Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) with painter-mother Elaine, Carol Shields's last novel *Unless* (2002) with writer-mother Rita, Jeannette Armstrong's novel *Whispering in Shadows*

(2004) with its painter-mother Penny, and Suzanne Buffam's poetry collection, *A Pillow Book* (2016), which interweaves moments of maternal care and observation within a contemporary iteration of the ancient Japanese genre of the pillow book. In each instance, the central protagonist is able to function successfully as an artist while also mothering her child(ren). This is not to say that the texts do not exhibit and explore some of the inescapable challenges or struggles that come with being a working artist and a mother, but that—unlike the texts explored in Chapter One—this paradigm is neither impossible nor untenable, and that in some instances, becoming pregnant and/or raising children is revealed to be conducive or catalytical to the creative process. Furthermore, a number of well-known and well-respected Canadian mother-writers have publicly explored the intersection of their maternity and their creativity in interviews, personal essays,[34] memoirs[35] and—in a few instances in the texts mentioned above—autobiographical fiction. Their tenacious presence and prominence in the Canadian and international literary communities attests to the extent to which the figure of the mother-writer is not only possible, but powerful.[36] They open up new maternal spaces where mothers can not

---

[34] Canadian novelist Liz Harmer has written of the intersection of her own motherhood and literary career in a 2018 article in *The Globe and Mail,* arguing that "I have become a better writer in the years since I became a mother and I can only conclude that either I would have anyway or that motherhood, rather than making me sacrifice my ambition, pushed me closer to it. Writing and mothering have both made my life richer with others, with other minds and other lives" (n.pag.). Recalling the early years with her three children, Harmer goes on to reflect, "I wrote while my baby slept on me and I read while she napped elsewhere. I didn't do the laundry. I got up early and wrote, or I left the house every Saturday to write. I nursed with a book in my hand… The stories piled up; the words accumulated. Three babies came during those years" (n.pag.). She ultimately concludes that "Motherhood will cost you something, will cost you a lot, but it doesn't need to cost you your imagination or your ambition" (n.pag.).

[35] As I outline in Footnote 3, two notable full-length Canadian memoirs that address motherhood and the writer's life are Marni Jackson's *The Mother Zone: Love, Sex, and Laundry in the Modern Family* (1992) and Camilla Gibb's *This is Happy* (2015).

[36] Many of Canada's most prominent women writers of the 1960s and '70s (not uncoincidentally, also the era of the rising prominence of "CanLit" as a literary industry and field of academic study) were also mothers. Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence, and Margaret Atwood, described by Munro's daughter Sheila as an "emerging triumvirate… who were cracking the shell of the female experience wide open" (S. Munro 239), all had young children in the early years of their careers: Munro had three daughters, Laurence had a daughter and a son, and Atwood had a daughter and two step-children.

only find the space and a voice with which to write, but where the subject of their creativity is often also their experiences of the joys and challenges of motherhood.

**Livesay's Pioneering Maternal Space**

The maternal poetry of Dorothy Livesay stretches across decades of her writing career, appearing sporadically in collections from the early 1940s into the 1980s. In and amongst her poetry on the natural world and socialist concern for the working classes, she contemplates the conflict she felt between her desire to write and the needs of her children, as I explore in Chapter One, and meditates on the corporeal experience of giving birth, as I outline in Chapter Three. The majority of her maternally-themed poetry, however, addresses her unique experiences and subjectivity as a mother. An integral, defining feature of Livesay's poems of motherhood is their use of "maternal refraction," wherein the maternal and artistic gaze is turned towards one's children. Eti Wade develops this concept in relation to the visual art of photography and specifically mother-artists, "in which the mother photographs her children" (286). Here, the mother-photographer turns her creative gaze and her camera lens onto her own children, and the resulting "photographs articulate maternal subjectivity through the process of reverse-mirroring" (287). This "maternal refraction" makes use of "the camera to articulate [a] subjective maternal position, capturing a maternal gaze" (287). Livesay engages in much the same process in her maternal, lyric poetry that frequently takes her son, Peter, and daughter, Marcia, as her subjects.

Livesay's Governor General's Award-winning *Day and Night* (1944) includes a number of maternal poems, among them "Five Poems: For Marcia," addressed to Livesay's daughter. The five short lyrics that comprise "Five Poems" are oblique and symbolic meditations on pregnancy, motherhood and the life-lessons a mother wants to impart to her daughter, about her

own experiences of creativity, how to cultivate imagination, and about how best to be in the world. The sections that comprise the poem are numbered in roman numerals, mirroring a five-act play, and begins with the quiet "dream" of pregnancy: "In the dream was no kiss / No banners were upshaken / The sure, unsevered bonds of bliss / Were the hands untaken" (Livesay *CP* 134). Unable to kiss her child yet, or hold her hands, the two are still connected in blissful "unsevered bonds" (134). Their connectivity is perfect, as "In the dream no faltering / Grew between your tree and mine" (134). It is a communion that needs no external affirmation, being "Wind silenced" and "sun embraced" and for which "We seized no outward sign" (134). Pregnancy is depicted as a time of floating ease, as "In the dream all burden fell / Sheer away" and the simplicity of their bodily interconnection is captured in the "bare breathing left— / Bare eyes and light-cleft minds were formed / And found, never to be bereft" (134). The ethereal unity of mother and child is once again renewed at the moment of the child's birth: "It was the dream I saw again / Meeting your person in the room / The dream, electrified" (134). The immediate and tangible personhood of the newly born baby is continuous with the dream-scape of pregnancy, it is the dream come-to-life and "electrified" (134), but it also marks a first moment of separation and maternal individuation, as the speaker notes that ever "Since, I am free: / Bird funnelling night flight alone" (134). The freedom of a solitary bird's night-flight runs counter to common tropes of new motherhood, wherein the symbiosis of mother and baby are taken for granted. But here, Livesay is articulating a new sort of maternal self-conception, with the mother regaining a degree of her autonomy at the moment of birth.

Section ii brings the new child into focus, as the mother-speaker contemplates her for the first time: "Your face is new; strange; / Yet infinitely known" (134). She articulates the commonly-felt sense of recognition many new mothers feel upon seeing their baby for the first

time, a sense that their faces are uncannily familiar. Livesay describes her daughter's features as having been "Loved in some century / Grass swept, tree sown" (134), gesturing towards a knowledge that is timeless and natural. The mother gazes upon her new daughter, "I memorize / The lineaments, so lean" and then shifts once again into the metaphor of a bird, but this time not for herself, but for her daughter: "Steel bird prey intent / Flight imminent" (134). This hard, determined and avian imagery is a marked departure from the soft and gentle metaphors that are typically used to describe babies. Here, the new autonomy of the child is acknowledged and celebrated. The mother envisions the new and independent life which is awaiting the child: "I see your stride (no walk) / Cleaving the air" which takes on more metaphorical imagery as the daughter is positioned amidst the open expanse of sky, "Cloud treading, your hair / Sickle bent" (135). But the child is newly born, and so has not yet embarked on its journey, it is still "early, early / Before dawn whispers" and "Before day fingers / The faulty doorway" (135). The "faulty doorway" is the gateway to the inevitably imperfect world which awaits the speaker's daughter, and even though it is still "Early in the late / Moon-tossed night," the child exudes a feeling of hope, as the speaker-mother describes, "Your face a flash / Foreruns the light" (135).

The final section can be read as both an ode to writers and the artistic impulse, along with life-lessons for her daughter. In this sense, it merges Livesay's motherhood and creativity. She writes, "Your words beat out in space— / Distant drums under the hum of day" (136). The words underpin the "hum" of daily activity, released into "space." Again, this can refer to the writer's imagined words, not yet set down on paper, or in a more literal sense to the child's burgeoning vocabulary and newly spoken words. Either way, they are words "Only the hunter hurries for / Only the parched heart hears" (136). The repetition of the "h" conjures a child-like whispering and softness, which is then contrasted against the visceral image of hunting and thirst. The next

stanza emphatically addresses either the reader, or the child, beginning with "Look, it takes long to grow a listener / To bend his bough, let fall his leaf to earth" (136). This need to "grow a listener" is both an invocation to not give up on self-expression, either through language-acquisition or creative writing, acknowledging that it takes time to find an audience for one's work, or an attentive companion who understands every nuance. It is about establishing and sustaining connection with others. Livesay also emphasizes the capacity of creative work to cultivate selfhood, as the imagined reader is able to soar: "Upward and on his[37] own words speeding / Leaps the self to light" (136). "Words" are thus rendered essential to bringing the "self" to fruition.

Two poems from Livesay's *Poems for People* (1947), "Preludium" and "Small Fry," take children as their subject, and can thus be interpreted as examples of Wade's "maternal refraction," where the mother may not be apparently present within the text, but whose gaze and observations give rise to the poem itself. Contained as they are in the same collection as "The Mother," which I explored as part of the impossibility of the mother-artist in Chapter One, these two poems also clearly form a part of Livesay's maternal poetry. The etymology of "Preludium," as a term historically used to describe the introductory notes in a piece of music ("Preludium" n.pag.). The poem focuses entirely on the bodily experience of a young baby, absorbing the world around it, learning to sit up and, finally, to stand. At first, the helpless "infant" is "like an invalid / Is slow aware of worlds to win" (Livesay *CP* 160). Simple gestures are sources of knowledge and pleasure, as "At first the lifting of a hand / Is gasping effort; and the clutch at cloth / Releases rhythm and delight" (160). The child develops its increasing bodily

[37] The use of the masculine pronoun here is troublesome in a poem otherwise focused on her daughter, as Livesay writes that it is "on his own words speeding" that "the self" "leaps… to light" (Livesay *CP* 136). I would venture to suggest that Livesay is merely reflecting the gendered biases of the time period, which—in the philosophical and cultural discourse of the 1940s—correlated the universal to the masculine.

independence, as soon, the "day blows when the body prone / Is propped, by inner urge is prodded vertical / And balanced on firm flesh" (160). This ability "To sit alone / Is an essential bliss" (160), and one that is proceeded by becoming "upright man," where the child is able "to cast off animal / To stand on tingling toes and balance there one's loved / One's certain self—supreme self-consciousness!" (160). The child's triumph at being able to stand independently seems to foreshadow greatness in the life to follow. As Livesay writes, if the selfhood that is established at this early age is strong and confident enough, the child will be capable of withstanding all of life's trials:

> And if the tower builded [sic] then
>
> Be bold and venturesome
>
> Not all negations, whipping snares
>
> Not all the frantic obstacles to face
>
> Can down the darer, hold the hurler here (161)

Livesay then makes a symbolic leap from a single, standing toddler to the mythological god Hercules, exhorting her reader, "O listen loud / Hear Hercules ascending to his height: / Behold the towering portent, Man alone!" (161). Livesay asserts the new, autonomous subjectivity of the child, a being entirely separate from the mother, with its own agency and free-will. This "Man alone!" is a marked contrast to the interdependency that is typical of representations of mothers and infants. And, I would argue, in asserting the child's independent being, Livesay is also indirectly asserting the mother's own autonomy as well. If the child is "Man alone!" then the mother is also, by extension, Woman alone, guiding and nurturing and caring, but nonetheless in full possession of her own, independent subjectivity.

Finally, Livesay returns to the theme of motherhood again in her 1983 collection, *The Phases of Love*, with "Mothering." The speaker is sharing a meal with her adult son and his new partner, and through his admiration and compliments, the mother-speaker comes to a new understanding of and perspective on all the years of maternal sacrifice she spent in raising him. The poem opens with the son "Speaking to his new mate— / both savouring the fish chowder / I had prepared" when, articulating his appreciation, "my son explained: / 'Yes, she has a way'" (Livesay *Phases* n.pag.[38]). This seemingly vague acknowledgment is met at first with surprise and confusion, "Not an explanation / but a declaration?" (n.pag.). She admits to her son's emotional reticence, observing that "He never would have said that / straight to my face!" (n.pag.). The unexpected acknowledgment of the mother's skill, her "way" with food preparation and domestic care, catches her off guard, as she reveals that her son has rarely, if ever, offered this direct appreciation. As she mulls it over, though, she begins to view the years of maternal care she has devoted to her children in a different light:

> Now, as I hear it
> second-hand
> I feel all those tight domestic years
> slipping away (n.pag.)

In the final lines of the poem, she comes to the conclusion that all the self-sacrifice was worth it after all: "those routines that had seemed to crush / my very self / were all the time creating a bond," a foundational, maternal bond: "mother to son" (n.pag.). She reflects on the near-total loss of self that she experienced amidst the repetitive demands of motherhood, but finally sees that this mother-work established a fundamental and sustaining bond. It is also fitting that this

[38] *The Phases of Love* is not paginated.

poem is the last of Livesay's maternal poems, as it satisfyingly concludes a chronological journey through the phases of motherhood, from birth, infancy and childhood to, finally, enjoying her adult children and the families they are now creating with their new partners. Livesay's multifaceted maternal subjectivities capture a wide range of affective responses to motherhood, from the warm maternal gaze marvelling at a child's growth and development, to ardent hopes for the child's promising future, and finally, to a sense of wholeness and well-being when the hard work of motherhood is acknowledged and appreciated.

**"All I want is everything": Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners***

Margaret Laurence was a pioneer in establishing a space for maternal narrative in Canadian fiction (Brandt *Wild* 18). She was also a newly single-mother when her most celebrated novels were written and published. In her posthumously published memoir, *Dance on the Earth* (1989), Laurence describes motherhood and writing as uniquely compatible, due to the flexibility of domestic life: "Women writers with children are fortunate in some ways. Among women with vocations… only writers (and occasionally, visual artists) can do their work at home" (136). While confessing that her "biggest frustration… was lack of time" (157), she notes that she does not believe that having children makes "women's writing less powerful, less broad in scope. In fact, I believe the reverse is true. If I hadn't had my children, I wouldn't have written more and better, I would have written less and worse" (166).[39] Of the home Laurence made with her two children in England after leaving her husband, affectionately referred to as Elm Cottage,

[39] Of her early years as a writer, with only a handful of minor publications to her name, Laurence reveals that she worked "in the evenings when the children were asleep" though "[w]riting became easier when both kids were in school because I could work for at least a few hours during the day" (*Dance* 157). She also sacrificed a great deal of sleep to continue to pursue her passion: "I recall many weekends when I scribbled by the light of a candle in the kitchen while the others slept" (157).

she reflects: "Those years in Elm Cottage were the years in which my children grew up. That house remains in their minds, and in mine, as their childhood home. It was also the house in which I wrote six books, the most productive years of my life" (167). Laurence explicitly identifies the important confluence of both her literary productivity and the raising of her children. The same material space of Elm Cottage signifies both artistic creation and maternal care. Laurence cultivated a duality of space that allowed for both work and nurturance.[40]

Morag Gunn, the protagonist at the heart of Laurence's final novel, *The Diviners* (1974), is—like her creator—a writer and a single mother (to one daughter, Pique). The text is in many ways a classic *kunstlerroman*, tracing the artistic development of Morag, from her earliest attempts at writing in "the scribbler in her top dresser drawer" when she is nine years old (Laurence *Diviners* 61), to her first published novel in her mid-twenties, to the novel's present, where she is working on her fifth novel, which turns out to be the very text we are reading.[41] However, it is also a narrative of a single-mother who has raised her daughter alone while pursuing a literary career, and who, when the novel opens, is preoccupied with worry for a

---

[40] Much like her mother-writer peers, Laurence structures her writing/work hours around her children's school hours:

> After they left for school at quarter to eight, I would have two or three cups of coffee and then start my day's work. I rapidly learned to put off domestic jobs… What helped me change my priorities was that my writing, as well as being my vocation, had become a source of income… I learned every conceivable short-cut in making meals and managing a house, and I learned to write in the morning, when I had a maximum of mental and physical energy. I would stop writing a few hours before the children arrived home from school, not only to make dinner and do the domestic stuff but also to be mentally and emotionally out of the fictional world and back in the world of my life. (*Dance* 170)

Laurence quickly learns to prioritize the time she needs to write because, as she realizes, it is more than a passion or a "vocation," but rather "a source of income" and therefore just as much a necessity to her family's survival as food preparation and general household tasks. She asserts that her "priorities were clear: the kids and the work, the work and the kids" (171).

[41] Susan Ward likewise observes that "the early parts of the novel are filled with images of the young Morag writing: the child writing in her notebook…; the student submitting her first story to the university paper; the young wife writing stories and first novel during the hours her professor husband works…; the professional struggling to finish her latest novels even as she worried over the whereabouts of her nineteen-year-old daughter" (181).

teenaged Pique, who has left home again, leaving a note jammed into her mother's typewriter, "where Morag would be certain to find it" (11).

The inextricable connection between Morag's motherhood and her creative life is succinctly emblematized in the image of her typewriter with her daughter's letter of departure captured within it. As Robert Kroetsch observes, Morag, "sitting down to her typewriter—sitting down to begin [writing]—finds she has already begun. Uncannily, the sheet of her paper in her typewriter is written upon" (130). Furthermore, not only has she begun, but "[s]he has been begun. She has been positioned" (130). In sitting down to her typewriter with Pique's note already written there, Morag "enters into a dialogue with the positioned self created by Pique" (132). What Kroetsch implies but does not explicitly outline is that Morag has been positioned *as a mother* in relation to Pique. Her subjectivity is immediately rendered as specifically maternal, with her worry and love for her daughter. From the opening pages of *The Diviners,* Morag's identity as a writer is inextricable from her role as a mother. Helen M. Buss also observes that "[t]he lives of Laurence's female artist-figures… are placed firmly in the context of the mother-daughter relationship" (54). Of *The Diviners* more specifically, Buss reflects that the novel explores "how a creative relationship of mother and daughter is integrated with the artistic process itself" (54). And more pointedly, "the mother-daughter relationship… becomes the source of inspiration for the artist figure" (55). Myrl Louise Coulter goes further in her 2007 dissertation on Jane Urquhart, Carol Shields and Margaret Laurence, observing that "Morag is one of the first, if not the first, feminist mothers in Canadian literature" (217).

Morag's burgeoning literary career and her emancipation from her oppressive, patriarchal marriage to English professor Brooke both coincide with her pregnancy. Her first novel is accepted for publication, the tension in her increasingly stifling marriage boils over, and she

reunites with and enters into a brief love affair with Jules Tonnerre, a Métis man from the same small, Manitoba town where she was born (a relationship which results in her pregnancy with Pique). Hildegard Kuester notes the significance of the fact that "Morag's emancipation from Brooke's authoritarianism is linked with a surge of creativity; her rebellion coincides with the writing of her first novel" (112). Furthermore, Kuester concludes that "playing the role of Brooke's submissive wife becomes incompatible with [Morag's] new self as a writer" (112). Coral Ann Howells concurs, arguing that "writing her first novel is the means by which she frees herself form an oppressive marriage" (*Private* 48).[42] And indeed, after a series of volatile arguments with Brooke following the publication of her novel, Morag finds herself wandering the streets of Toronto day after day, wondering how to liberate herself: "She knows now that she does not want to stay with Brooke. Leaving him, however, remains unthinkable. Uncertainty grows to panic proportions" (Laurence *Diviners* 283). One afternoon, she is again aimlessly walking with a growing "feeling of being separated from herself" (284) when she encounters Jules by chance, and she finds a material, sexual means by which to free herself from Brooke, who has also refused to have a child with her, something which Morag desires deeply. Of her first love-making with Jules, Morag reflects that "this joining is being done for other reasons [beyond desire], some debt or answer to the past, some severing of inner chains which have kept her bound and separated from part of herself" (292).

When Morag returns to Jules's apartment after packing a suitcase and leaving Brooke, their first conversation is about birth control. Jules begins by saying, "Look, I didn't say before,

[42] This sequence of events resonates with what Laurence has written about her own life and the fundamental conflict she felt between her writing and her marriage, explaining that she was "uncertain… about [her] triple role as wife, mother, and writer" and that her "sense of being torn apart" was most acute upon the publication of her first novel in 1960 (Laurence *Dance* 128). Laurence and her husband subsequently separated in 1962, and she took their two children with her to England to focus exclusively on her literary career (158).

but you don't want to get pregnant, do you? Because -" and Morag interrupts him asking, "Would you mind very much if I didn't do anything to try not to?" (301). He laughingly consents, and she assures him she won't request or expect any child support, and he wryly admits that "you probably wouldn't stand much of a chance of getting it, from me… It's all I can do to keep myself going, right now" (301). They live together for the next month, until Morag gets herself organized to head to Vancouver, where she envisions establishing herself independently, and focusing on her writing, though she can't articulate why the West Coast has such an allure, reflecting only that "She doesn't know. Maybe it only ever occurs to prairie people, when they light out, to go yet further west" (297).

It is just as she sets off on the train to Vancouver, alone and with $500 to establish herself, that the first symptoms of her pregnancy appear: "Morag goes into the train john. Vomits. Cleans up tidily after herself" (303). While she first attributes her sickness to being "upset or too tense," (303) the suddenly frightening possibility that she might actually be pregnant occurs to her: "Unless, of course, she is pregnant, which is hardly likely after a couple of weeks. What if she is, though? How could she have been so unbalanced as actually to try to be? How would she earn a living? She hadn't thought of that at the time, but does so, now. Fear. Panic" (303-304). Of course, Morag *is* pregnant. And it is noteworthy that the first symptoms of her pregnancy emerge simultaneously with her literal voyage into her own autonomy and independence. Motherhood is thus inextricably interwoven with Morag's freedom. She rents a room on the top floor of a rooming house and, as her pregnancy progresses, her landlady hires her to do the cooking and cleaning, and Morag has a space that is exclusively her own: "She dips cautiously into what remains of her five hundred bucks and buys a secondhand oak dresser, a desk, a bookcase, a couple of numdah rugs, a crimson Hudson's Bay point blanket… These, plus

a lamp with a bulbous Japanese-lantern shade… all make the room hers" (316). The details of the décor suggest a cozy and comforting home—warm wood, books, rugs and blankets. This is finally a space in which Morag envisions herself writing: "A woman, if she is to write, Virginia Woolf once said (or words to that effect), must have a room of her own. The garret bit never appealed to Morag unduly, but by God, it is at least a room of her own" (316). She conjures Woolf and expresses her satisfaction at having, at least, a private space within which to work. The irony is that presently, "she feels too tired and lousy most evenings to do any writing at all" (316). However, the liberation she experiences in a "room of her own," is significantly coupled with her pregnancy—her newly established independence as a writer is inextricable from her impending motherhood. Notwithstanding Morag's exhaustion and its interference in her ability to write, these two figures, that of the artist and the mother, are reconciled in the sardonic Joycean title of the subsequent section, "*Portrait of the Artist as a Pregnant Skivvy*" (316). And indeed, it is while Morag is hugely pregnant that a representative from her publisher comes to visit her to tell her that her first novel has been accepted at publishers in the United States and England and encourages her not to waste her time cooking and cleaning, but rather to send out the short stories she's working on, try her hand at writing feature articles, and promises to put her in touch with a literary agent (320).

Morag's imminent motherhood becomes a grounding, centring force in her newly independent life. While she grapples with the fears and insecurities she feels about her future now that she has forgone the financial and emotional security of her marriage, the child growing within her centres her in her new life: "She no longer feels certain of anything. There is no fixed centre. Except, of course, that there *is* a fixed centre, and furthermore it is rapidly expanding inside her own flesh" (318). This centring of the figure of the mother is a consistent

preoccupation of the entire novel. As Nora Foster Stovel notes, "*The Diviners* might be titled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Mother*, for mothering her babies and her books, her two types of offspring, is as important to Morag in *The Diviners* as it is to Margaret in *Dance on the Earth*" ("(W)rites" 101). Furthermore, this privileging of the maternal can be interpreted as a specifically feminist iteration of the *kunstlerroman* and Laurence's exploration of female creativity, as "[t]he link between motherhood and artistic creativity, as it is foregrounded in *The Diviners*, is one of the basic issues of feminist criticism" (Kuester 115). In this sense, "the writing of *The Diviners* is a performative act: it gives voice to still-repressed aspects of women's lives" (116). And indeed, Laurence highlights Morag's journey through pregnancy and her experience of giving birth in often visceral detail. Unaccompanied by a partner or even a friend, Morag is alone with the medical staff while she gives birth to Pique, and unable to heed her (male) doctor's advice to "hold back" and wait before pushing. Laurence gives us insight into Morag's interiority and her thoughts in this moment: "*You try holding back. You just try. I can't. I can't.*" Her disobedience in the face of the doctor's instructions is also narratively significant; Morag has made a point of disobeying so many patriarchal demands and expectations, through her divorce, through her literary vocation, and through her bearing of Jules's child out of wedlock. Pique's arrival is rendered with equal drama, as "the child rips its way into its life, tearing its mother's flesh in its hurry, unwilling to wait. It is over. Relief. Morag, numbed, sleepy and yet totally alert, can feel no pain at all. The nurse places the child on Morag's now-gaunt belly. It is writhing a little, covered with streaks of blood and yellow slime. The cord is not yet cut" (Laurence *Diviners* 326). This focus on the specifically maternal experience of giving birth in unflinching detail, avoiding typical, sanitized clichés and centring the narrative on Morag and the physicality of birth is an important narrative and feminist choice. Morag insists on holding

her daughter right away, before the nurses "clean her up" (327): "Morag holds the child, still slippery, very warm. The slightly slanted eyes are tightly closed, and the miniature fists are clenched. The baby's hair, damp, is sparse and straight and black. Her skin is pinkish tan" (327).

After the baby is born, Morag continues to write, even though she "has to write longhand now, at nights, so as not to waken the child. She can only type when Pique is awake. The room grows smaller every day" (328). The room shrinks in inverse proportion to how much Pique grows, and so she moves into a larger home, which occupies the top two floors of a house she shares with Fan, an exotic dancer, who chastises her for focusing too exclusively on her writing and her daughter, telling her that she "oughta get out more… You go on devoting the whole of your entire life to that kid, and I'm here to tell you what'll happen, sweetheart. She'll grow up and leave without a backward glance" (338). Morag replies that "I wouldn't want her to do anything else, when the time comes. And I'm not devoting my entire life to her, Fan. I'm working, and that's what I want to be doing" (338). Nancy Gerber notes that mother-artist heroines typically "seek creative outlets that simultaneously enable them to nurture themselves as well as their daughters" (4), something which Morag actively pursues in the years while she is writing and Pique is small. Gerber further theorizes that the textual expression of this dual nurturing of self and daughter forms a unique "maternal discourse" which "exemplifies the mother-artist's ability to express her subjectivity, while recognizing the daughter as separate, yet intimately connected" (4-5). That Laurence has chosen to make Morag's child a daughter is also significant in this respect, as "[t]he gendering of the child as female establishes a motherline, locating mother and daughter in a feminist genealogy of history and culture" (5).

The years pass, and as Pique grows into a little girl, Morag writes her second novel, which "is accepted by… three publishers, Canada, America, England" (Laurence *Diviners* 354).

Howells notes that Morag's "chronicle of novel-writing is also the record of her daughter Piquette's birth and growing up" (*Private* 50). The conflation of her writing life and her motherhood continues throughout the text, but it is not without its struggles and conflicts. Morag moves to England with Pique, magnetically drawn to the United Kingdom because of her Scots heritage, working in a bookstore part-time and continuing to write. When Pique becomes sick, Morag has to take time off work, and making up the lost time at the bookstore means less time for her writing: "Morag agrees to work afternoons as well as mornings for the next fortnight, although grudgingly. She has done no writing at all during Pique's illness and now will do virtually none for the next couple of weeks. A month away from it, and getting back inside will be torture. She thinks of writers with private means (of which she knows none) and puts a mental hex on them" (Laurence *Diviners* 394). The narrative reveals the struggles Morag faces between the time and energy she needs for her literary work, and the needs of her young daughter, especially when she is ill. Laurence highlights Morag's sense of frustration at the lost and fractured time, and yet the simultaneous necessity of earning money to support herself and her daughter.[43]

As Pique grows into a teenager and a young woman, many of Morag's difficulties continue to centre on her troubled daughter. Just as the novel opens with nineteen-year-old Pique

---

[43] Of the genre of the "maternal kunstlerroman" and the corollary protagonist of the "mother-artist," Gerber observes that "[m]other artists are not represented as endlessly nurturing; rather, they are heroines who frequently experience guilt, despair, shame, and anger" (19). And while not in the context of her writing, but rather in Pique's dawdling through the evening routine whenever Morag plans to go out later (in this particular scene, to go meet her newest love-interest, the artist Dan McRaith), Morag struggles with her maternal guilt but also her concurrent need for autonomy: "Morag cannot say to the child *I have to have some life of my own,* because that concept will only be understood by Pique many years later… Nor can Morag afford (although she sometimes does) to lose her temper with Pique, for this merely brings on a severe attack of her own self-reproach" (Laurence *Diviners* 396). Howells notes that "[m]uch of the novel concerns the problematic of mothering… Morag finds herself juggling the demands of career, child and personal life in a precarious, anxiety-ridden balancing act, which sounds all too familiar to contemporary women" (*Private* 36). Brenda Beckman-Long writes that "Morag's life story dramatizes not only the exhilaration of artistic self-definition, but also the anxiety, alienation and fragmentation of many female authors" ("Genre" 91).

having left home and left behind a note in her mother's typewriter, their turbulent mother-daughter relationship punctuates the narrative. A memory from when Pique was fifteen also reveals the extent to which Pique has struggled with racism as a result of her father being Métis, and her mother's public reputation as a writer. She comes home from school one afternoon clearly troubled, and asks her mother, "What's the legal age a person can quit high school?" When Morag presses her for more details on what is prompting her desire to drop out of school, Pique finally exclaims, "What do you know of it? You've never been called a dirty half-breed. You've never had somebody tell you your mother was crazy because she lived out here alone and wrote dirty books… Have you? Have you?" (446). Of course, the racism towards Indigenous peoples has nothing to do with Morag's literary career, but certainly her reputation for being a 'crazy lady' in the forest "alone" writing "dirty books" is directly related to her novels and her unconventional life as a single mother. The narrative makes clear that Morag's personally emancipatory choices—to pursue a literary career, to be a single mother beyond the bounds of patriarchy—often have unintended and difficult consequences for her daughter. While the figure of the mother-artist retains much of her inherent conflict and difficulty in Laurence's novel, she emerges nonetheless as distinctly new and possible. Even within the context of these social and personal difficulties, "the mother-artist [still] represents liberatory possibilities—the potential for invention rather than repetition" (Gerber 19). And it is this invention that is ultimately at the heart of Morag's narrative, and which expresses itself both thematically and formally.

The cyclical narrative structure of *The Diviners* typifies the feminist and maternal literary modes that many critics have identified. The novel opens with Morag at her typewriter, worrying about her newly-adult daughter, and cycles through flashbacks from her life, her career as a writer, and Pique's childhood and adolescence, events that move progressively forward in

narrative time, until by the conclusion, the multiple narrative threads arrive at the present.[44] Annis Pratt argues that these cyclical patterns are an attempt to resist and transgress social taboos that have refused women's participation in archetypal mythologies, an exclusion that has resulted in their temporal and spatial alienation (11). Gerber goes further, insisting that mother-artists are "witnesses and survivors" of patriarchal oppression, who are thus "situated within, rather than marginal to, history" and have a unique ability to "critique… patriarchy and patriarchal institutions of motherhood" (8). Howells likewise argues that "[w]omen are deeply implicated in the existing structures of the social world as mothers, daughters, lovers and wives" and as a consequence, they "search for new ways of structuring their lives and their stories" in order "to acknowledge their genuine need for affective relations and responsibilities at the same time as they register resistance to such constraints" (*Private* 28).

In many ways, Morag succeeds in realizing the dreams she is too frightened to articulate when she is still in university, when she tells her best friend and fellow-aspiring writer, Ella, that she fears her literary ambitions make her not "normal," and she confesses that she also secretly desires "to be glamorous and adored and get married and have kids…. *As well*. All I want is everything" (Laurence *Diviners* 198). The impossibility of achieving this "everything" is an anxiety that preoccupies the young Morag, who finds herself crying on Ella's mother's shoulder not long after, wondering at the source of her tears and anguish: "What the hell is she crying about?... Because she wants her own child and doesn't believe she will ever have one? Because she wants to write a masterpiece and doesn't believe she will ever write anything which will

[44] In her 2004 Masters thesis on the mother-writer in Shields's *Unless,* Laurence's *The Diviners* and Thomas's *Intertidal Life*, Jessica Langston observes that "the female *kunstlerroman* often begins in the narrative present" and "relies upon circularity" (21). She argues that this "circularity… not only firmly establishes the protagonist as developed female artist, it also allows this same artist to revisit the past, creatively expressing and even rewriting her struggles as woman and as artist" (21-22).

even see the light of day?" (202). Even in her youth, she articulates her dual desires to both have a child and "write a masterpiece" together. She wants both simultaneously, and does not want to choose. Of course, we know that she discovers marriage to be an emotional and intellectual entrapment that she cannot bear, but she *does* have a child of her own, and she *does* become a writer, so in this sense, she has at least partially achieved that which she dreamed of while she was young. Morag is able to sidestep the binds of patriarchal marriage, form satisfying (though perhaps not lasting) sexual and emotional relationships with men on her own terms, raise her daughter Pique and become a writer. She cultivates both literal and figurative spaces which allow her to mother her daughter and to write, revisioning as she does romantic conceptions of the artist. By the time Pique is fifteen years old, Morag has bought a permanent home for them in rural Ontario, which they have been living in for four years. The narrative describes their time there as encompassing "Vast changes. Pique nearly grown up. The log house renovated in various ways as finances have permitted. A large window now enables Morag to look out at the river while writing at the long oak table in the kitchen. An electric stove. New furnace. The old linoleum removed, and the original pine floors sanded and restored" (445). The locus for her creativity is revealed to be the kitchen table, which creates a blended space that encompasses both the domestic and the literary. And the evolving nature of the space, expanded, enhanced, with a wider view of the river, function as a material expression of Morag's success. As Sherrill Grace notes, "For Morag, who is not an Ivory Tower artist, art and life are synonymous" (169). She embodies the possibilities of the mother-writer in Canadian literature, perhaps, as Brandt has suggested, for the first time. In this respect, *The Diviners* sets the stage for the narratives to come, that continue to explore the generative possibilities of the mother-writer into the late-twentieth and early-twenty first centuries.

**Audrey Thomas: The Mother-Writer of *Intertidal Life***

Audrey Thomas has a substantially quieter public profile than Atwood, Shields, Munro, or Laurence, though her prolific literary output and the scholarly engagement with her work throughout her fifty-year career attests to her tenacity and success as a writer. As a mother to three girls herself, Thomas has also frequently addressed issues of motherhood and child-rearing in her novels.[45] In a lengthy 1984 interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Thomas reveals the ways in which her motherhood has inflected her writing, and how she has occupied her dual role as mother and writer throughout her career. Thomas explains that she never viewed being a mother and a writer as problematic or irreconcilable. In fact, it was her ambition to do both. She explains that she had wanted her first publication to be in *The Atlantic,* and it was, and that she "wanted to get married, …wanted to have children" (Wachtel "An Interview" 26). In summary, she explains, "I've done just about everything I've set out to do" (26). Wachtel asks her about the difficulties of being a mother and a writer, identifying it as a "question that's come up a lot in the last ten or twenty years" (32). Thomas shrugs and concedes, "it's difficult. But if you thought about it, it would be more difficult. I never thought, for one minute, that I couldn't do both. When young women come to me and ask, 'Can I do both?' I say if you have to ask you better not do it" (32). Thomas suggests that this fundamental self-doubt is fatal to succeeding as a mother and a writer, "Because the one thing you have to have is an enormous amount of energy. And a very strong belief in yourself because it's all very well for 'Mom to have a job' as long as she's bringing in money, but ideally, Mother should have a job she doesn't like" (32). This echoes Andrea O'Reilly's theory of the omnipresent, mid-twentieth century ideal of sacrificial

[45] For example, in addition to *Intertidal Life,* an earlier novel, *Latakia* (1979), features a mother as its central protagonist and the short story, "If One Green Bottle…" (1967), depicts one woman's fragmentary experience of stillbirth.

motherhood, an oppressive sociocultural discourse which insists in part that even if mothers—who should, in the first place, occupy their motherhood with a natural and essential ease, and be primary caregivers to their biological children—do undertake paid work, "children must always come before the job" (O'Reilly *Rocking* 38-39). Thomas goes on to elaborate that while there seems to be a general understanding or tolerance of women who are "out working for the family," it is an entirely different story if a woman wants to "shut [her]self off for three or four hours a day and do something which is not going to bring in any money but which [she] love[s] doing" (Wachtel "An Interview" 33). She concedes that "it's not what mothers are supposed to do" but in her particular case, "[m]y children have been very, very supportive" (33).

When Wachtel asks Thomas if there are any advantages to being a woman and a writer, Thomas suggests that the domestic spaces of the home, which have typically been women's purview, are uniquely suited to literary creativity: "I think that women writers do have that advantage that the interior, within the house, is where they've been powerful, so if they write at home, I don't think they have to make as many excuses for that to the world outside… So it takes them twenty years to publish their first story… They'll keep on working at it" (33). The domestic spaces of the home are thus uniquely empowering, according to Thomas, but she also identifies inherent impediments, in that it may take two decades to get a first publication. And Thomas cautions further that juggling multiple priorities may mean that women writers need to be flexible with their timelines for their success: "This is something I… tell young women writers. 'If you do want to have a husband, family and a writing career, don't be in a hurry.' I knew which came first, when. When my children were very, very small there was hardly any time to write. It didn't matter, I'd write when I could, and I never felt any particular conflict. Also, I never wrote when they were around… My working day is really the school day" (33-34). From

an individualistic, feminist perspective, this advice may seem to be counseling women writers to curtail their ambitions, or to expect less from themselves with respect to their literary output and progress. These realistic limits, however, can also be beneficial: "That's another thing, you get very disciplined… You had your chance, if you didn't do it between those hours when the kids were at school, that was it for the day" (34). Ultimately, Thomas reveals that she has achieved a great deal of personal satisfaction with her life and her literary career. Almost echoing Morag's youthful declaration in *The Diviners* that 'all [she] wants is everything,' Thomas reflects, "Everybody wants it all. Everybody wants everything. Well, I have had it all. I have been very lucky that way" (52).

The confluence of writing and motherhood is a theme that is also featured in some of Thomas's fiction as well. The figure of the mother-writer is a more muted, though still integral, aspect of Audrey Thomas's novel *Intertidal Life* (1984). The novel centres on the experiences and subjectivity of Alice, who is recalling the dissolution of her marriage to Peter after he becomes entranced by the free-love, counter-culture movement of the late 1960s and early '70s in British Columbia, and leaves Alice and their three children to pursue affairs with Alice's friends. The novel explores Alice's feelings of grief and betrayal at the end of her marriage, and her often uneven attempts to redefine herself independently of Peter. Children and writing are not inherently conflictual, but rather the gendered expectations imposed on Alice in her marriage and her patriarchal, sociocultural milieu. In the face of these obstacles, she asserts her right to her creativity and to cultivating space that allows her to write: "Alice had made a sign which she hung on the fence. NOT OPEN TO THE VISITING PUBLIC BEFORE 3:30 MON – FRI. She explained that she was writing a book. 'Or trying to.' [She remarks to her friend Trudl.] 'Life keeps getting in the way'" (Thomas *Intertidal* 60). Her home doubles as her work space, and she

inverts the traditional "Open" storefront sign with her "NOT OPEN" declaration during the day. She too attempts to make the most of the hours when her daughters are at school (until 3:30), trying to protect this time for her own creativity. And, she reveals, nighttime is another fruitful time for her writing. She explains in a diary excerpt, "I'm very rational in the daytime, making porridge, making soup, keeping the home fires burning. Night thoughts and poetry begin after the sun goes down. And that too is when I read about voyagers of exploration" (69).[46]

In an interesting parallel to *The Diviners*' Morag, Alice also articulates her desire to "have everything": both a happy romantic partnership and her writing career. When her friend Stella asks her if she "would rather be with a man than writing your novel," Alice replies: "I want the whole works! I want to be with a man… *and* be writing my novel. I want to be free to work six or eight hours a day and then play with my kids and then have supper miraculously appear and the children instantly fall asleep… and then my man and I go off down the road in the moonlight to make love in the woods" (179). Alice expresses her desire for uninterrupted time for her work, someone else to take care of the daily domestic tasks of food preparation, and the energy and companionship of an idealized sexual relationship. In some respects, she acknowledges the impossibility of children who "instantly fall asleep" and food that "miraculously appear[s]," and yet if she were a male writer with a family, in all likelihood life

[46] As Alice reads about the many expeditions of famous male explorers, she wonders about women's quests for knowledge and understanding, and in what ways they may differ, now that there are more allowances for them. Is it "the turn of women, now, to go out exploring?... Would we take our children with us, on these voyages of discovery? FIRST MOM ON THE MOON. Would our lovers wait faithfully for us until we returned? (Would we really want to go?)" (69-70). She subverts the 1960s news headlines of the "First Man on the Moon" by exchanging "Man" for "Mom," which registers as an intentional act of absurdity, but also opens up new exploratory possibilities for women and mothers. She also expresses the anxiety and ambiguity of a mother who is also staking a claim on the world, wondering at the risks and costs associated with various iterations of exploration, and if mothers would even want to leave their children and lovers in the first place. She gestures towards a difference between the male artist or explorer, who ostensibly has no such qualms, and the conflicts that are unique to a mother-artist or mother-explorer.

may function remarkably close to this ideal (and certainly the prodigious productivity of canonized male literary figures suggest this is not beyond the realm of possibility).

The novel also explicitly explores the nature of motherhood, including Alice's journal entries where she copies out a dictionary definition and etiology of the word "mother," (136) and wonders at the erasure of her autonomous self in that role: "Who can see the 'other' in mother? Calling the school for so many years—'Hello, this is Hannah's mummy.' 'This is Anne's mummy' to make identification easier for the teacher. All wrapped up in her family" (136). Alice highlights the erasure of the autonomous self in motherhood, the ways in which women's identities often become subsumed within the lives of their children. However, despite these critiques, Alice also reveals a deep sense of satisfaction and happiness in her children: "Alice and the children were playing word games… And then they all had hot chocolate with marshmallows floating in it and went to bed. Alice picked up her sleeping youngest whose cheeks were flushed from the fire. I *like* them,' she thought, 'I not only love them, I *like* them. That's the miracle'" (119). Alice expresses her deeply felt maternal desire, that is, her "wish to participate in their mutual relationship; and the choice… to put her desire into practice" (*Maternal* de Marneffe 3). It is clear that for Alice, as for most mothers who experience maternal desire, "caring for [her] children *matters* deeply to [her]" (5). Furthermore, when Alice finds herself alone with her children, she establishes a harmonious and peaceful routine, which allows her to care for her daughters and do her creative work. Her daughters get up and she spends time with each of them, and once the two youngest are either at school or with the babysitter, she sits with her eldest daughter who is studying at home and "one at either end of the small kitchen table, they began their day's work. It was a pleasant routine for all of them. Alice had never felt closer to her children" (Thomas *Intertidal* 147). This shared time of work and productivity between mother

and daughter once again transforms not only the domestic, maternal space of the home and the kitchen table (much like Morag, who also wrote at her kitchen table), but also opens up the relationship between mother and daughter to include creative work. As Joan Coldwell notes, "[t]he most positive relationship in the novel is that of mother and daughter" (145) and, furthermore, Alice's "fruitfulness is reflected in her three daughters and [her] flourishing garden, both made analogous to her artistic productivity" (146-7). Krishna Sarbadhikary concurs, observing that Alice "finds new ways to negotiate between motherhood and writing without a necessary split between mother and artist" (66).[47]

Alice, despite her unhappiness at the end of her marriage, finds a means by which to mother her daughters and continue to be productive as a writer. Returning for a moment to the weekday scene of Alice and her eldest Hannah, working together at the kitchen table, the narrator observes that "Sometimes, with Hannah doing her schoolwork at one end of the kitchen table, Alice at the other, writing, there was a kind of peace. They took turns putting wood in the small cook stove, stirring the soup" (Thomas *Intertidal* 202). This comingling of mothering, domesticity, and creative work becomes a new vision of the artist. Thomas's rendering of the mother-writer refuses the myth of the solitary (male) genius. As Sarbadhikary writes, "Alice… do[es] not deny the mother. Disillusioned with the myth of the Freudian romance, [she]

---

[47] In fact, once Peter is no longer in their home full time, she finds a closeness with her children that she had never previously experienced. This parallels Adrienne Rich's anecdote from *Of Woman Born*, where during a summer vacation alone with her three boys, she experiences a freedom in her interactions with her children and a space for her own creativity that she had never encountered before:

> Without a male adult in the house, without any reason for schedules, naps, regular mealtimes, or early bedtimes so the two parents could talk, we fell into what I felt to be a delicious and sinful rhythm… [W]e ate nearly all our meals outdoors, hand-to-mouth… stayed up to watch bats and stars and fireflies, read and told stories, slept late… we lived like castaways on some island of mothers and children. At night they fell asleep without murmur and I stayed up reading and writing as I had when a student, till the early morning hours. I remember thinking: This is what living with children could be—without school hours, fixed routines, naps, the conflict of being both mother and wife with no room for being, simply, myself. (Rich 192)

deconstruct[s] and subvert[s] it" (182). She slowly "learn[s] to live as [an] independent wom[a]n while retaining and strengthening maternal links" (182).

However, Thomas does not give her narrative over entirely to a triumphant or happy ending. By the end of the novel, we learn that Alice is preparing for an unspecified surgical procedure (perhaps she has cancer), and cleaning her house with her daughter Flora, "[j]ust in case" something goes awry with the surgery and she does not survive it (Thomas *Intertidal* 272). She has arrived at a certain peace and equanimity with her ex-husband Peter, and her tidying of the home they used to share together and discarding of unwanted objects functions as a metaphorical laying to rest of her inner turmoil of the end of their marriage. The following morning, as Alice lies on the gurney waiting for the anaesthetic to take effect, she has a sudden surge of panic: "She wanted to see Flora one more time, Anne, Hannah. She wanted to see Peter. There were so many things left unsaid. She had never made her will" (281). She quickly falls under the effect of the anaesthetic, and the final scene of the novel is Peter and Flora fishing in a rowboat just off the coast. Flora is crying, and Peter tries to reassure her, telling her, "It's going to be all right, you know" (281), and offering to let her row the boat, as a means of distracting her. "She nodded silently and, bracing their fishpoles beneath the seats, they carefully changed places" (282). The novel concludes here, on an unsettling and unresolved note. Thomas never reveals whether Alice survives the surgery, whether Peter's reassurance that everything will be all right is, in fact, the truth. And Alice's absence from this concluding scene effectively ends her narrative without her entirely. That her eldest daughter occupies the privileged place of the final line, instead of her mother, also shifts the narrative focus away from Alice, opening up a space of ambiguity. As much as Alice was able to successfully mother her three daughters through the turmoil of divorce, embark on a series of emotional and sexual affairs, and continue writing and

publishing, is certainly a testament to the successful mother-writer. However, the novel's conclusion is decidedly un-triumphant. For all her newfound space and possibility, the figure of the mother-artist in Thomas's 1984 novel still remains fraught and uncertain.

**The Maternal Voice of Sharon Thesen's "Marine Life, 1970"**

West-coast poet Sharon Thesen has been described as an "exemplary figur[e] in the post-colonial attempt to deconstruct the traditional lyric from within" while still retaining "the lyric's strengths, its music, its directness of tone, its suddenness" and "push[ing] against its thematic constraints in variously successful ways" (Barbour 73). She has been celebrated for her commitment to "exploring the capacities and the restrictions of the lyric as it is written in the English language in the final quarter of the twentieth century" (Banting "Tremendous" 112). Fred Wah in particular has lauded Thesen's contribution to Canadian poetry, arguing in the mid-1980s that "she has written some of the finest lyric poetry in the west in recent years" (114). Wah draws attention to the ways in which Thesen successfully makes tangible the connections between the subjective and objective, where "The 'subjective' is feeling, personal and private emotion, sensation, interior, physiology, and proprioception.[48] The 'objective' in this case is the public poem, the song, the lyric. Feeling gets registered in the body by the stomach, pulse, heart, breath, etc. and these sensations are notated in the lyric poem as 'cadence'" (Wah 114). Bruce Whiteman, however, asserts that "to characterize her work as lyric seems… insufficient and limiting" (55) and that "equally important is the experience… of language as a separate 'materiality'…, something to which the poet has access, but over which she has no control" (55-56). In fact, Whiteman goes on to note that "If there is a continuing concern to be found in all of

[48] As I explore in Chapter Three, Daphne Marlatt is another West Coast poet who was deeply influenced by Olson's concept of proprioception.

Thesen's work it is perhaps that of the ecstasies and confusions of the articulate body in the world. This is not a subject in the ordinary sense, but rather a condition or preoccupation that is articulated, imagined, or inspissated among the particular details and situations on which her poems focus" (56). Douglas Barbour highlights the geography of the West Coast as having a particular influence on Thesen's work, noting the fact that Thesen lives "near the ocean, part of an ever-expanding Pacific Nation of post-colonial writing" (72) and that this sense of place allows for "a sense of potential transformation based on [her] visceral knowledge of the shifting boundaries between land and sea, the literal dissipation of margin [she] observe[s] twice a day" (73).

Thesen began writing poetry and working as a literary editor in the 1970s and published her first full-length collection in 1980. Her fourth, *The Beginning of the Long Dash*, appeared in 1987, and has been described thematically as "familiar, urban, female, west coast, and contemporary" and as one which "catches moments in time, pauses, expectancies, sadnesses, loves, silences" (Hindmarch 40). The narrative perspective of the poems shifts and encompasses the "girl, young wife, mother-to-be, mother of toddler, lover of man/language/beauty, ex-wife, friend of women, urban dweller, neighbour, single parent of teenage boy, new wife in new home" (40). The series of poems I am interested in here, "Marine Life, 1970," are comprised of ten numbered, brief lyrics which explore maternal experience through the speaker's recollections of pregnancy, birth and motherhood. The date in the poem's title, 1970, is also the same year as Thesen's son, Jesse, was born (J. Harris 83), and the dedication which concludes the final poem in the series, "*for Jesse*" (Thesen 28), indicates the poem's autobiographical origins. In her 1987 review of *The Beginning of the Long Dash,* Gladys Hindmarch describes "Marine Life" as "a beautiful sequence" consisting of "a memory of Thesen's son's birth and moments of his early

childhood which include flashes of the disintegration of a marriage, images of other more substantial mothers, hands on hips, this mother and child swinging in a park, swimming in the ocean, baby's first words and steps" (41). Indeed, Thesen's poetic consciousness is one that takes in the wide sweep of maternal and material experience, refracted through themes of nature, water, the immutable substance of the body, feminist theory and the startling yet relentless passage of time. Her articulation of maternal experience is one that is rooted in materiality, located within the body, the natural world and the objects of everyday life.

The title of the series, "Marine Life, 1970," in addition to locating us in the specificity of time and the year of her son's birth, also connects maternity with the natural world and the liquid vicissitudes of the ocean, even as the first lines of the poem shift us into a terrestrial landscape. Thesen's lyric "I" opens with an image of agrarian plenty: "August corn, tender green & gold / against the stark jumbled backdrop / of alder" (Thesen 19). The fertility of the corn harvest, coming as it does towards the end of the summer season, is overseen by the astral machinations of "Leo roaring in the sky / upstaged by the sun that beat down / day after day" (19). That this natural and astral bounty is, in fact, a memory of pregnancy is revealed in the declaration that "I have a photo / of myself walking back / from the garden, pregnant" (19). This photograph, capturing the speaker in the fullness of expectant maternity, connects the fecundity of the harvest to a garden setting, with its attendant Edenic echoes and intimations of lush growth. The forward motion of walking, frozen as it is in the stillness of the photograph, suggests a paradoxical progression and stagnancy. The pregnant speaker is advancing forward through time towards motherhood, and yet is simultaneously captured in the timelessness of the static photograph. That she is "walking back / from the garden" suggests a return to something as well, and while it is

not identified, it can be reasonably assumed that she is returning from the garden to her home, a re-orientation towards domesticity and interiority.

The second lyric transitions from the pregnant speaker returning from the garden to the visceral immediacy of labour and birth. She meditates on the experience of childbirth, opening with the remark, "Having babies is pushed / into the tidal heave, / your body employed by an earthquake" (20). As in the previous lyric, Thesen correlates maternity with the natural world, though this time in more dramatic, earth-shifting forms, from the massive water displacement of the tides to the terrestrial upheaval of earthquakes. The mother's body in labour becomes a tool through which life emerges, "employed by an earthquake" over which she herself has little control. Likewise, the ebb-and-flow motion of the tide symbolizes the waves of contractions that the body experiences in childbirth. The result of these earthly and corporeal forces is "The glazed infant brought forth / breathless, as if worn out / from blowing up balloons" (20). The vernix coating the newborn is transformed into a remnant of a primordial aquatic life, as "On shore they lay gasping / wondering what next?" (20). These first tentative and difficult breaths mark the infant's transition from the amniotic fluid of the womb to the oxygen and earth that will comprise its home.

The second stanza of the second lyric then marks a physical return to the ocean, connected by an ampersand: "& years later went down there / on purpose rubbing lotions / into the skin" (20). The protective sunscreen correlates with the vernix of birth and the beach environment brings the child once again to its origins in water, even as they remain physically rooted to the earth by "lying down / on the ground" (20). The speaker's gaze takes in the child's body, noting that the "Light tracings / of hair growth mimic ocean's flow / along the body," which in turn serves as proof that "we were once / marine life" (20). The swirls of fine hair on

the skin, formed while suspended in amniotic fluid, connects our lives foundationally to liquidity and water. The "marine life" with which Thesen is preoccupied contains the existence of her son and her experiences of motherhood, as evidenced by the title itself.

In the third lyric, we remain in the physicality of the beach with the mother and child, playing together in the surf: "Chafed waist / from damp water wings, sand / in the crotch" (21). The bodily discomforts of sand and salt give way to the difficulty of moving towards the water while wearing flippers, as "We haul / ourselves forward" with "flippers / weakly bracing / body to infinite beach" (21). The discordance of flippers with terrestrial movement and the consonant difficulty of "bracing" the "body" to the "beach" gestures towards the contrasting ease which the child and mother feel in the water. Indeed, the pair seem locked in an exclusionary relationality which forsakes all others, as the speaker explains that "We try to be nice, / sharing our toys" (21). Furthermore, the mother-child dyad begins to recall their primordial features and the ancient evolution undergone from fish to mammal: "Bronze scales drop from our bodies / in a slow rush of music / leaving ovals, triangles of fur" (21). This transformation to human is never complete, however, as Thesen celebrates those primordial features which remain, as we have "At the base of the spine / the glittering remnant / of a golden, ascendant tail" (21).

The fourth lyric reveals the extent to which motherhood has altered the speaker's relationality to the world around her, from her interactions with her cats to her husband. She writes, "When I became a mother / I was no longer mother / of the cats" (22). This opening dichotomy of mother/not-mother suggests the extent to which the speaker experiences her sense of self as being in flux, as her becoming a mother necessitates other identity shifts and transitions. Her cats no longer hold their earlier, privileged status in her consciousness; she now dismisses them as mere cats and ignores their bad behaviour, lightly chastising one for being

"such / a silly kitty" while letting "the tomcat step / among the dinner plates" (22). She describes the cat's steps as "sure, down-soft, white-clawed," but then shifts this imagery into relation to her marriage as well, with the following line, "marmalade feet. The marriage / terrified me, dinner & breakfast / lay on the table like torn-up telegrams" (22). Suddenly, these "sure, down-soft, white clawed / marmalade feet" are transformed into an oblique commentary on the perilous state of her marriage, seemingly stable, soft and sweet like marmalade, but hiding its "white claws" within. The dinner table becomes a site not of communal gathering and sustenance, but a battlefield of miscommunication, with the meals and dishes discarded "like torn-up telegrams" (22). The speaker prepares herself for conflict as she reveals that "I dreamed / karate moves from the top / of the stairs, sinister *tai chi*" and intimates a symbolic violence as "knives / flashed in the kitchen," though their threat is largely diffused in that they are merely gestures or signposts, "like lighthouses / in the feeble night" (22).[49]

The fifth section opens with a sense of movement and urgency, refocusing on the child as a recently-walking toddler: "Suddenly you were upright / rounding a corner / into a room"(23). The energetic exploration of the child is captured in its movement from room-to-room, in contrast to the mother's contemplative stillness, sitting "in a poor velvet armchair, / loaves of bread rising like consciousness / in the oven" (23). The bread-making of domesticity is conjoined with the maternal "consciousness" that is observing the child's activity, while the "poor velvet"

---

[49] A remarkable number of the texts I consider in this project also feature mother-artists who are caught in unhappy marriages or unsuccessful, dissolved partnerships with the fathers of their children, including Daphne Marlatt's "Rings", Fiona Tinwei Lam's *Enter the Chrysanthemum*, Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye,* Audrey Thomas's *Intertidal Life* and Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the conflicts between creativity or artistic ambition and heterosexual marriage for women warrant further consideration. Marianne Hirsch theorizes that this "death or elimination of the father, the brother, the husband, the male lover from feminist fiction… has become either a precondition or an important preoccupation of feminist plots" from the 1970s onward (129). Di Brandt likewise observes that "Reclaiming feminist and maternal agencies in a masculinist culture comes at a high cost" and that beginning in the 1970s, "such reclamation, where even possible, involved high-risk social rebellion, usually leading to separation or divorce and loss of financial security and social community for women and their children" ("(Grand)mothering" 254-255).

of the chair in which she is seated hints at prior luxury or decadence that has come to an end. The poetic gaze then shifts back to the maternal, as the speaker once again addresses her child, noting that "You were upright / though alarmingly short" and "would sooner or later / fall down & cry" (23). The vulnerability of the young child, despite their new bipedal mobility, is captured in their alarmingly small stature and the inevitability of falling and crying. But this new developmental phase also provides an occasion for the child's parents to bond again and draw closer to one another, as she concludes the lyric by telling the child that "Your parents / fell in love again / buying your first shoes" (23).

The sixth lyric casts a broad, symbolic stage upon which the toddler flourishes, along with a leading, regal role for the mother, as the child is "Watched over / by the Queen of Heaven and Earth" (24). The prominence of the maternal figure in the child's eyes, being "Queen" of all things, gives way once again to the maternal consciousness that guides the poem, as the speaker narrates their excursions into the world, naming places and things as they go: "I took his little hand & we walked / in the direction of the park, / the corner store" (24). In these places, "Things were there / he had words for" (24). The child's initiation into language is also the first instance in which his gender is revealed, as the mother takes "his" hand in hers as they walk together. The revelation of the child's gender alongside the introduction to words suggests the importance of language to identity formation, not only for the child himself but also in the way the mother relates to the child. He is no longer the newborn, the toddler, or addressed directly, but he has taken on the role of a son. Together they begin to traverse and name the world, though the son is still forming himself around the perspective and worldview of his mother, emblematized in the son's bodily contortions to try and continue holding her hand: "It was a slow walk / the baby listing a bit from the reach / of his hand up to mine" (24). These are merely "Baby steps" that he

is taking, still very much within his mother's purview, as the poem concludes with his asking of permission, "Oh Mother, / may I?" (24), with its young echoes of nursery-rhyme song.

Thesen's maternal speaker marks the passage of time and the growth of her child in her own corporeal transformations in the next, seventh, lyric, when she observes that "Weaning breasts fade away" (25). The breasts which "fade away" once she is no longer breastfeeding are contrasted against the child's inverse process of growing-up, as "The baby cries at the door, / falls down, gets another tooth" (25). The spectre of marital dissolution returns, however, as the maternal body continues to wither: "The mother falls asleep reading / *Women in Love,* body smaller & smaller / inside the nightgown" (25). Once the speaker is asleep, she is assailed by prophetic "Bad dreams / in which someone you love / leaves you" (25). These dreams are a reflection of the disconnection and coldness that is growing between the speaker and her partner: "You can't figure it out – / how monstrous the indifference" and "how difficult" it now is "to get his attention" (25). He is staying out later and later in the evenings, and she is growing less interested in engaging with him, as "Headlights climb the bedroom wall / much later. You decide whether to pretend / to be asleep" (25).

The eighth lyric finds our speaker immersed in the feminist theory of Kate Millet, "Turning the pages of *Sexual Politics*" and her identification with and reaction to the material is rendered audible through "the sound of underlining & sighs" (26). Surrounded by the trappings of motherhood and successful domesticity, "bread rising, laundry folded, / baby sleeping" and "the things on the list / called Things To Do / all done" (26), our speaker nonetheless finds herself on the outside of what she believes to be ideal motherhood: "At the park / I watch the other mothers / who stand in bathing suits" (26). Their assured, self-confident stance, "with hands on hips" make them "look like mothers, / I don't" (26).

However, in the ninth and penultimate stanza, the speaker is once again firmly ensconced within her maternal role, addressing her son directly and remembering a day spent swimming in the ocean together: "Took you swimming / in the ocean / not very deep" (27). With her son, she stays above the surface of the water, in safe, shallow waters. She introduces him to the pleasures of swimming as she recalls how she "ran your body / through the water" with his "belly down, face up / laughing under the sun bonnet" (27). The happiness of the child is captured in his laughter, encircled as he is in the safety of his mother's hands. Their day of play continues in a park nearby, as "Later you fit in my lap / as we go for a swing" through "the sunny air / rushing back and froth" (27). Together they experience the spatial disorientation of their playful motion through the air, a "mild vertigo at the height, a sad / dropping sensation / through the bottom of the arc" (27). That the "bottom of the arc" is described as "sad" suggests that this oscillation between high and low is an introduction to and mimicry of the typical ebbs and flows of emotional life. This image of the mother and child, as she imparts these unspoken life lessons to her son, harkens back to an archaic maternal role, as she explains that "I'm singing an ancient song / so softly only you can hear it" (27). As in the rest of the lyric, the "you" she is addressing here is her son, even with her "mind a million miles away," with the alliterated repetition of "m", obliquely gesturing to the near universal maternal "m" of mama / ma / mom / mother. This maternal mind oversees the world entire, as it remains "suspended, with sand on its feet, / mouth a little open exhaling / the pale & wandering stars" (27). Stretching from the materiality of the sandy beach upon which mother and son were swimming earlier, the maternal figure is also a towering, creative force, conjuring the night sky above with her breath.

The tenth and final lyric in the series returns us to the specificity of time's passage, noting the precise date, "September 5, 1984", fourteen years after the "1970" of the title. It is

evening, as the opening line indicates simply that "Night fell" (28). The passage of time is captured in the transformations of nature, as "seasons come & go, hydrangeas / cast their weedy blue blossoms / over soaking September lawns" (28). The seasonal transition into autumn that September represents reflects not only the speaker's own aging process, as she notes that "tastes in everything shift / to a cold self-possession / the color of TV" (28), but to her son's growth and transformation as well, as "This child / is expert. He is his father / when he makes a wish" on his birthday cake (28). The reflection of the father that the mother recognizes in her son's face acknowledges his evolution from little boy to grown man. The date that opens the poem identifies her son as now being 14 years old, in the early years of adolescence, and as such, he is also beginning to assert his independence. The mother reveals that he "fights me on the topic of friends. / The door opens and closes / without permission" (28). He no longer submits to the requests of his mother, as "he goes / hatless on windy days" and is now "composed / of privacies, embarrassed / when I cut the cake exclaiming" (28). Her son no longer believes in the fairy-tale-myths of childhood and begins to form his own private and autonomous sense of himself. The closing segment of the lyric also reveal that the mother and father, whose increasingly distant relationship was the subject of the poem's earlier sections, are no longer together, as once the son's fourteenth birthday party concludes and "the ball is over," "the father has gone home" (28), a home which is clearly elsewhere.

The concluding lines of the poem reassert the primacy of the maternal perspective that has driven the ten lyrics that comprise "Marine Life." Thesen leaves the reader with a mother in the act of contemplation: "the streetlights & the moon compete / to fall asleep thinking by" (28). The mother lying in bed, ostensibly looking out her bedroom window at "the streetlights & the moon," may be physically still, but her consciousness remains active. The content of her

thoughts are perhaps the contents of the very lyric we are reading, or she may be ruminating on something else entirely. That she concludes with the dedication, "*for Jesse*"—the name of her son—however, suggests that it is her child and her motherhood that she is left considering.

The portrait of motherhood Thesen paints in the ten lyrics that comprise "Marine Life" is multifaceted and sensorial. She symbolically conjures the richness of the natural world, from the push and pull of the tides to the grainy salt of the ocean shore to vibrant, rain-soaked flowers in her garden. We witness a mother contemplating her growing child, grappling with a failing marriage and, in the eighth lyric in particular, in the act of writing about these experiences. Like the mother-writers Thesen both follows and precedes, she draws on her own biographical experiences of marriage and motherhood to inform her creative work. The mother-writer Thesen conjures in the ten lyrics which comprise "Marine Life" explores the materiality of maternal love, invites the reader into her creative consciousness and privileges maternal experience as a source of wisdom.

**The "I" of the Mother-Artist: Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye***

Margaret Atwood, the most prolific and perhaps most internationally recognized mother-writer under consideration, has been reticent to publicly discuss her personal life, though she did reflect on her literary ambitions and the prospect (and reality) of combining them with motherhood in a 1990 interview for *The Paris Review's* series *The Art of Fiction*. In the interview, when asked, "Has motherhood made you feel differently about yourself?" Atwood explains that early on in her writing career, she idealized women writers who were "genius suicides, like Virginia Woolf. Or genius reclusives like Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti. Or doomed people of some sort, like the Brontës, who both died young… George Eliot didn't

have any children; neither did Jane Austen" (Morris 79-80). She confesses that "[l]ooking back over these women writers, it seemed difficult as a writer and a woman to have children and a domestic relationship. For a while I thought I had to choose between the two things I wanted: children and to be a writer" (80). Ultimately, though, she concedes, "I took a chance" (80). She reveals the extent to which she was drawn into the prevailing Romantic mythologies of the artist, and rather than decisively rejecting them, she positions her decision to become a mother as a gamble of sorts, a "chance" she took that—apparently—has worked out quite well.[50]

Atwood's 1988 novel, *Cat's Eye*, also explores the interrelation of artistic ambition and child-rearing in the form of a *kunstlerroman* about Elaine Risley, a visual artist who has two daughters and is attending a retrospective of her work at a feminist art gallery in Toronto, an event which provides the narrative framework for a remembered chronicle of her childhood,

---

[50] Atwood is similarly forthcoming about her literary ambitions as a young woman and her concurrent desire to have a family in her short essay "Great Unexpectations: An Autobiographical Foreword," which prefaces a 1988 collection of critical essays on her work, *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms.* She explains that in 1960 she was nineteen years old and in her third year of undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto, and "wanted to be—no, worse—was determined to be, was convinced I was—a writer" (Atwood "Great Unexpectations" xiii). However, she admits that she was beset with anxiety about the prospect of being a woman writer, since she had already encountered the biographies of notable female writers, "which were not encouraging" (xiv). As examples, she cites Jane Austen, who "never married Mr. Darcy. Emily Brontë died young, Charlotte [Brontë] in childbirth. George Eliot never had children and was ostracized for living with a married man… Some had managed to combine writing with what I considered to be a normal life—Mrs. Gaskell, Harriet Beecher Stowe—but everyone knew they were second rate. My choices were between excellence and doom on the one hand, and mediocrity and cosiness on the other" (xiv). Atwood articulates the conflict that appears to be inherent to conceptions of the artist, that in order to be considered among the 'literary greats,' a woman must eschew motherhood and domesticity, or else be condemned to obscurity. And for a time, Atwood assumes that she will be forced to make a choice. At first, her younger self decides that she will choose art over children: "That would be my life, then… I would live by myself, in a suitably painted attic (black) and have lovers whom I would discard in appropriate ways… I would never have children. This last bothered me a lot, as before this I had always intended to have some, and it seemed unfair, but… Art came first" (xv). However, even in the absence of any affirming reassurances or clear examples of successful mother-writers, she decided to try. She refused the constraints of the binary conception of either/or, and cultivated a life and artistic practice that allowed for both:

> I now live a life that is pretty close to the leaves-in-the-backyard model I thought would have been out of bounds forever. Instead of rotting my brains with absinthe, I bake (dare I admit it?) chocolate chip cookies, and I find that doing the laundry with the aid of my washer-dryer is one of the more relaxing parts of my week. I worry about things like remembering Parents' Day at my daughter's school and running out of cat food, though I can only afford these emotional luxuries with the aid of some business assistants and a large man who likes kids and cats and food, and has an ego so solid it isn't threatened by mine. (xvi)

adolescence and young adulthood. Andreea Şerban notes that "As the title suggests, the book is centered on the eye, first of all as a sensory organ, with its primary function of perception and looking, but also… suggestive of artistic vision" (77). The novel is also notably aligned with Atwood's persistent preoccupation with the figure of the woman artist in her work, as "[f]rom an early stage in her writing career, [she] has shown a striking interest in the fate of the female artist and author in Canada" (McWilliams 26). Furthermore, Ellen McWilliams argues that "*Cat's Eye* is the novel most explicitly interested in… the paradoxes and dilemmas of being a Canadian woman artist" (30). Carol Osborne also points out that Atwood's 1988 'portrait of the artist' works to subvert accepted narrative structures by "making her protagonist middle-aged, secure professionally as a minor artist, and already a wife and a mother" which thereby "avoids the traditional pattern in which the point of maturation is marked by the heroine's marrying, giving birth, or finding a career" (97).[51]

When Elaine is in her twenties, she has no desire to become pregnant, and envisions herself with a life dedicated to art. When she begins an affair with her older art teacher, she thinks disparagingly of her classmate Susie, who is also Josef's former lover, who apparently wanted to get married. Elaine reflects darkly, "I don't want to marry Josef, or anyone else. I have come to think of marriage as dishonorable, a crass trade-off… I've put myself beyond marriage. …Instead of marriage I will be dedicated to my painting. I will end up with my hair dyed,

[51] The text also shares many interesting parallels with Laurence's *The Diviners* from fourteen years prior: both Elaine and Morag suffer childhood trauma of various kinds (Elaine is tormented by her best friends in grade school and Morag is orphaned after both her parents die of polio), their first significant love affairs are with their much older professors (Elaine with her Hungarian art teacher Josef, and Morag with Brooke), they both have failed first marriages, they both move to the West Coast as single mothers to escape the constraints of their pasts, and they are both middle-aged, with a sense of reflecting back over the entirety of their lives (Morag is writing her last novel, and Elaine is attending her retrospective exhibition). And like *The Diviners*, children are not presented as inherently incompatible with artistic creation. In fact, it is Elaine's discovery of her accidental pregnancy with her boyfriend at the time, fellow-art student Jon, that opens up a subconscious contemplation of the trauma of her young childhood, and facilitates the creation of some of her most important paintings.

wearing outlandish clothes and heavy, foreign silver jewellery. I will travel a lot. Possibly I will drink" (Atwood *Cat's* 317). Marriage is inescapably bourgeois, "dishonourable" and "crass" (317). This once again echoes Atwood's own youthful assumptions of what an artistic life should entail. It is also noteworthy that immediately following these wry reflections on the features of an ideal artist's life are Elaine's anxieties about getting pregnant. In parenthesis, Elaine's inner monologue continues, "(There is of course the specter of pregnancy. You can't get a diaphragm unless you're married,[52] rubbers are sold under the counter and only to men… There are jocular terms for it: up the spout, bun in the oven. But such washroom notions have nothing to do with Josef and his experienced mauve bedroom. They also have nothing to do with me, wrapped as I am in dense minor-key enchantment.[53] But I make little checkmarks on my pocket calendar, all the same.)" (317).

As it turns out, it is not pregnancy with Josef's child that ends up forcing Elaine to shift both the conceptions and realities of her burgeoning artist's life, but an accidental pregnancy with a fellow-art student, Jon, who she becomes involved with towards the end of her relationship with Josef. And Elaine's pregnancy (unlike Morag's in *The Diviners*) is entirely unintentional. She and Jon are in an exclusive relationship but are not yet living together when she discovers she is pregnant: "One day, when nothing has changed, nothing has been done or happened that is any different from usual, I discover I am pregnant. My first reaction is unbelief. I count and recount, wait another day, then another, listening to the inside of my body as if for a footfall. Finally I slink off to the drugstore with some pee in a bottle, feeling like a criminal.

---

[52] Morag also encounters the same obstacle to birth control in *The Diviners.* When she goes to the doctor to get a diaphragm, he paternalistically tells her to come back after she's married (Laurence *Diviners* 220).

[53] Once again, Morag expresses a similar distaste and dissociation between the necessities of birth control and the emotions she experiences while in bed with Brooke, who "breaks away and fishes a small purple envelope from under the pillow, and takes out the safe, and she looks away, all at once embarrassed at this intrusion of some world outside their two selves, a world of drugstore and smirks" (216).

Married women go to their doctors. Unmarried women do this" (356). That she "listens to the inside of [her] body" as if it is a separate entity from herself, creeping around secretively in the dark, reveals the extent to which she feels that she has been betrayed by her own biology, a sentiment she expresses explicitly later in the narrative. When the test confirms what she already suspects, Elaine is "afraid to tell Jon" (356). Her reluctance stems from the fact that "He's said, often enough, that artists can't live like other people, tied down to demanding families and expensive material possessions" (356). Jon expresses the pervasive mythology of the ideal artist's life, alongside his own financial insecurity, being, as they are, without "expensive material possessions." Elaine is herself distraught at finding herself unexpectedly pregnant, though she articulates her dismay as a kind of void or nothingness: "I go back to my apartment, lie down on the floor. My body is numb, inert, without sensation. I can hardly move, I can hardly breathe. I feel as if I'm at the centre of nothingness, of a black square that is totally empty; that I'm exploding slowly outward, into the cold burning void of space" (356-7). Atwood here inverts the familiar tropes of pregnancy, of the woman's body as full of possibility, new life, growth. Instead, there is an emptiness, and an expansion into a paradoxically "cold" yet "burning" void. In the days that follow, Elaine drifts through her routines in a state of bodily dissociation: "Every move I make is sodden with unreality… My body is a separate thing. It ticks like a clock; time is inside it. It has betrayed me, and I am disgusted with it" (357).

However, notwithstanding Elaine's corporeal self-loathing, the shock of her unwanted pregnancy appears to unlock the sublimated trauma of her childhood, unearthing strange memories, sensations and emotions that begin to make their way into her art.[54] Elaine's

[54] She remarks that, "Until now I've always painted things that were actually there, in front of me. Now I begin to paint things that aren't there" (Atwood *Cat's* 357). What she begins to paint, without realizing it, are old objects from her childhood: "I know that these things must be memories, but they do not have the quality of memories.

pregnancy thus coincides with a renewed flourishing in her creativity, despite the fact (or perhaps because) she is so undone by it. The narrative then focuses on Elaine's surge of artistic productivity in the early days of her pregnancy, particularly the repeated paintings of Mrs. Smeath, who was the mother of one of her cruel friends, who compounded Elaine's suffering by implying that she deserved what the girls were doing to her because, with her atheist family, she was "exactly like a heathen" (192).[55] These paintings of Mrs. Smeath are central to Elaine's oeuvre, as they become "the anchor of her first group show, and perhaps the major series of her retrospective" (McCombs "Contrary" 11).

Elaine's burst of artistic productivity inspired by the cruel Mrs. Smeath then shifts abruptly in the subsequent chapter to Elaine's experiences as mother to her two year old daughter, Sarah. Atwood thus counterpoints a depiction of an external and malicious maternal figure in Mrs. Smeath with Elaine's nurturing maternal subjectivity. The dissociation and disgust she experienced in the early weeks of her pregnancy have given way to a portrait of maternal care. While Atwood skips over the details of Sarah's birth and Elaine's material transition to motherhood, the narrative provides a depiction of the minutiae of returning from grocery shopping with a toddler: "I wheel Sarah along the street in her stroller, avoiding the mounds of melting slush. Although she is over two, she still can't walk fast enough in her red rubber boots to keep up when we go shopping. Also this way I can hang the grocery bags from the stroller handle, or tuck them in around her. I know a great many such minor tricks now, involving

---

They are not hazy around the edges, but sharp and clear. They arrive detached from any context; they are simply there, in isolation, as an object glimpsed on the street is there" (357).

[55] The young Elaine overhears Mrs. Smeath speaking about her to her sister, acknowledging that the other girls are bullying and tormenting her but that she deserves it because "It's God's punishment… It serves her right" (Atwood *Cat's* 193). The young Elaine is overcome by a powerful sense of injustice and violent hatred, and indeed, it is Mrs. Smeath who becomes a recurring, central motif in this burst of creativity that coincides with her pregnancy: "One picture of Mrs. Smeath leads to another. She multiplies on the walls like bacteria, standing, sitting, flying, with clothes, without clothes, following me around with her many eyes" (358).

objects and gadgets and the rearrangement of space, that I didn't need to know before" (359). This rearrangement of space and focus on the details of daily life encompass not only the necessary accommodations for life with a small child, but in her relationship with Jon too; they have gotten married and have a larger home: "We're living in a larger place now, the three of us: the upper two stories of a red brick semidetached house with a sagging wooden square-pillared porch" (359). And she admits that "It's because of [Sarah] that we got married, at City Hall, for the oldest of reasons. One that was nearly obsolete" (360). Their home is larger, and *almost* as bourgeois as their decision to get married, with its "red brick" and "square-pillared porch," notwithstanding that it is also semi-detached and sagging. Elaine has also clearly abandoned her earlier disillusionment with the institution of marriage, even while she acknowledges herself as being on the cusp of the sociocultural obsolescence of 'shotgun weddings.'

While pregnant and married, Elaine experiences a transformation in her self-conception and in her appraisal of the world around her. In contrast to the nothingness and void she felt at the beginnings of her pregnancy, and her younger disenchantment with the bourgeois prospect of ever getting married, with marriage and her advancing pregnancy, she begins to experience and view herself differently: "Right after we were married, I lapsed into a voluptuous sloth. My body was like a feather bed, warm, boneless, deeply comforting, in which I lay cocooned. It may have been the pregnancy… Or it may have been relief. Jon glowed for me then like a plum in sunlight, richly colored, perfect in form. I would lie in bed beside him or sit at the kitchen table, running my eyes over him like hands. My adoration was physical, and wordless" (361). Elaine's dissociation and alienation from her own body metamorphoses into what she describes as "a voluptuous sloth," and she feels cocooned and secure in her body "like a feather bed, warm, boneless, deeply comforting." She attributes this sense of quiet celebration and safety within her

body to both her pregnancy and to the "relief" of being in a committed, monogamous (for the time being) relationship with her partner. She reveals an awakened sexuality and desire for Jon as well, as he "glowed… like a plum in sunlight," physically "perfect." Her desire is, as she puts it, "wordless" and "physical," as she gazes at him in bed or "at the kitchen table." Once again, the recurring motif of the kitchen table emerges, as a site of domesticity, stability, and in the early days of their marriage, love.

Of her art in this period, Elaine acknowledges that "For the first year after Sarah was born I didn't paint at all. I was freelancing then, working at home, and just keeping up with the few book cover assignments I'd taken on was a major effort. I felt clogged, as if swimming with my clothes on" (362). The demands of caring for a small baby interfere with Elaine's creative expression, leaving her unable to "paint at all" (362). But now, despite the year-long hiatus, Elaine reveals that she is emerging from the difficult, first-year transition into motherhood, characterized as it was by exhaustion and hormonal effects: "For the first year I was tired all the time, and fogged by hormones. But I'm coming out of it now. I'm looking around me" (360). Notwithstanding the fact that she finds herself struggling with her self-confidence, she slowly and persistently tries to get back into her creative projects: "I've done some of what I call my own work as well, although hesitantly: my hands are out of practice, my eyes disused. Most of what I do is drawing, because the preparation of the surface, the laborious underpainting and detailed concentration of egg tempera are too much for me. I have lost confidence: perhaps all I will ever be is what I am now" (362-3).[56] But nonetheless, she begins. Despite the fact that her

[56] Her lack of confidence is directly connected to the immediacy and materiality of her new life as a mother, and faintly echoes Friedan's rhetorical question of "Is this all?" (1), except without the hope inherent to the question, and with a paralyzing sense of stagnation.

"hands are out of practice" and her artistic "eyes disused" she begins to draw. It may not be grand, colourful canvasses, but it marks a return to her creative expression.

As with other mother-artists, she structures her work time around her child's schedule: "I work at night, when Sarah is asleep, or in the early morning" (365). Furthermore, she finds herself meditating on maternal themes in her work:

> Right now I am painting the Virgin Mary. I paint her in blue, with the usual white veil, but with the head of a lioness. Christ lies in her lap in the form of a cub. If Christ is a lion, as he is in traditional iconography, why wouldn't the Virgin Mary be a lioness? Anyway it seems to me more accurate about motherhood than the old bloodless milk-and-water Virgins of art history. My Virgin Mary is fierce, alert to danger, wild. She stares levelly out at the viewer with her yellow lion's eyes. A gnawed bone lies at her feet. (365)

The ferocity of her re-inscription of the biblical, iconographic Mary echoes her own strong feelings about motherhood, as she remarks of her relationship with her daughter, "I love her ferociously" (360).[57] In contrast to the "bloodless" maternal archetypes that populate Western art history, Elaine paints a Virgin who is blood-thirsty and animalistic, with "gnawed bones" and "yellow lion's eyes" testaments to her savage capabilities. This, to Elaine, seems a more "accurate" depiction of the intensity and ferocity of her own affective experiences of motherhood.

---

[57] The image of the Virgin Mary also relates to Elaine's childhood trauma, as in the culmination of the bullying she endured at the hands of her friends, they force her to venture into a ravine to collect a hat they threw over a bridge, where she falls through the ice into the river and almost dies. It is a vision or hallucination of the Virgin Mary that eventually leads Elaine to safety, and into her own mother's arms, who comes looking for her in the evening darkness (Atwood *Cat's Eye* 200-206).

As was the case in Thomas's *Intertidal Life* and Laurence's *The Diviners*, the central impediment to the mother-artist's creativity and happiness in *Cat's Eye* is not her child(ren), but the patriarchal, heterosexual relationships within which they are all ensnared. Despite the brief intensity of Elaine's passion for Jon after they get married and while she was pregnant, it is almost simultaneously revealed that this contentment will not last, as the narrative begins to elaborate the discord in their relationship: "Jon and I have begun to have fights. Our fights are secret fights, conducted at night, when Sarah is asleep: a squabbling in undertones. We keep them from her, because if they are frightening to us—as they are—how much more frightening will they be to her?" (361). While Elaine concedes that Jon is a good and loving father, he is also often absent: "He makes toys for her… and lets her play with ends of wood and leftover pieces of cloth… while he's working. That's when he's here. Which is by no means most of the time" (362). Jon also takes issue with Elaine working at night while Sarah is sleeping: "Jon does not like me painting at night. 'When else can I do it?' I say. 'You tell me.' There is only one answer, one that would not involve the loss of his own time: *Don't do it at all.* But he doesn't say this" (365). Elaine understands intuitively that her own creative practice is an irritant and inconvenience to Jon, namely because it leaves her unavailable to him at night when he would like her attention on him instead. But since they have a small child who Elaine cares for during the days, it is the only time left for her work. Roberta White also draws attention to the role of her marriage to Jon in her lack of artistic productivity: "Elaine's marriage to fellow art student Jon more seriously interrupts her progress in art. Even as Jon drifts from one trendy art fad to another, Elaine has no time to paint at all in the first year after their daughter is born" (165).

Things between Elaine and Jon continue to deteriorate as the narrative progresses and Elaine ultimately discovers that Jon is being unfaithful to her and, at the same time, winter comes

and, along with it, illness for Sarah and Elaine. The general misery of Elaine's domestic life is thus externalized and emblematized in the unhappiness of everyone and everything around her, which then begins to interfere with her art: "It's winter. The heat goes off, comes on again, goes off, at random. Sarah has a cold. She coughs at night and I get up for her, bringing her spoonfuls of cough syrup, bringing her drinks of water. In the daytime we are both exhausted" (393-94). Elaine, too, is physically unwell during this period: "I am sick a lot myself this winter. I get her colds. I lie in bed on weekend mornings, looking up at the ceiling, my head clogged and cottony. I want glasses of ginger ale, squeezed orange juice, the sound of distant radios. But these things are gone forever, nothing arrives on a tray. If I want ginger ale I'll have to go to the store or the kitchen, buy it or pour it myself. In the main room Sarah watches cartoons" (394). What Elaine desires is solicitous, maternal care, except that of course, *she* is the mother now, and there is no one to mother her. It is also interesting to note the repetition of the word "clogged," which Elaine also uses to describe her lack of artistic productivity in the year following her daughter's birth. While in this particular instance, she is congested and "clogged" and unable to work because of the flu, it is because she catches Sarah's colds. As she lies in bed, she longs for the comforts of her own childhood, soothing drinks and the "distant radio" to which her parents always listened, and instead is listening to her daughter's cartoons in the other room.

Most significantly, Elaine's creative output dries up: "I don't paint at all anymore. I can't think about painting. Although I've received a junior grant from a government arts program, I can't organize myself enough to lift a brush. I push myself through time, to work, to the bank to get money, to the supermarket to buy food. Sometimes I watch daytime soaps on television, where there are more crises and better clothes than in real life. I tend to Sarah. I don't do anything else" (394). Amidst the incessant colds and the brutal winter, Elaine finds herself

unable to paint. She busies herself with running errands for the house, watching television, sinking into a morass of stereotypical housewife misery. Even though she has received the external validation for her art in the form of a government grant, she finds herself unable to do her work. Ultimately, Elaine's disintegrating mental state culminates in a depression that is similar to her feelings of emptiness and nothingness at the beginning of her pregnancy, creating a thematic palimpsest, once again, with the trauma she experienced as a child. She explains that, "I don't want to see anyone. I lie in the bedroom with the curtains drawn and nothingness washing over me like a sluggish wave. Whatever is happening to me is my own fault" (394). One night, when Jon stays out all night with his new lover, Elaine makes a half-hearted suicide attempt, cutting her arm with an Exacto knife. Jon finds her bleeding on the floor and rushes her to the hospital, where she pretends it was just an accident while she was cutting a new canvas for a painting. And while she hides the truth of her intentions from the medical staff, the episode functions as the beginning of a personal awakening, wherein she continues to contemplate suicide, while also acknowledging that this prospect is impossible—namely because of her daughter: "At night I sit beside Sarah's crib, watching the flutter of her eyelids as she dreams, listening to her breathe. She will be left alone. Or not alone, because she will have Jon. Motherless. This is unthinkable" (397).

Finally, like Morag before her, Elaine decides that the only solution to her unhappiness is to escape not only her failing marriage but the city itself: "If I stay here I will die. It's the city I need to leave as much as Jon, I think. It's the city that's killing me" (397). One night, she wakes up while Sarah and Jon are sleeping, with the intention of getting ready for her departure: "I turn on the lights in the living room. I know I must start packing, but I don't know what to take. Clothes, toys for Sarah, her furry rabbit. It seems too difficult, so I go to bed" (397). The next

day, however, after Jon leaves, her resolve returns: "In the morning, after he leaves, I bundle Sarah into the stroller and take some of my grant money out of the bank. I don't know where to go. All I can think of is away. I buy us tickets to Vancouver, which has the advantage of being warm, or so I suppose. I stuff our things into duffel bags, which I've bought at Army Surplus" (398). After a brief parting conversation with Jon, Elaine and Sarah get on a train heading west, a journey that Morag also made while pregnant with Pique. In each case, the writer/artist brings her child along with her in some form on her journey towards independence. The child and the mother are inseparable—it is the father who becomes not only superfluous, but an obstacle to freedom. Elaine explains, "We don't have a sleeper, because I need to save the money. I sit up all night, Sarah sprawled and snuffling in my lap. She's done some crying, but she's too young to realize what I've done, what we're doing" (398).

Once Elaine and Sarah are settled in Vancouver, Elaine having found a house to rent near Kitsilano Beach, a co-op preschool for Sarah and a job refinishing antique furniture, she begins once again to paint: "Gradually I grow back, into my hands. I take to getting up early in the morning, before Sarah is awake, to paint. I find I have a minor, ambiguous reputation, from the show in Toronto, and I am invited to parties" (399-400). Elaine quickly finds herself amidst a community of artists and feminists with whom she begins to exhibit her work: "I'm also invited to take part in several group showings, mostly by women. Women artists of many kinds, women of many kinds are in ferment here, they are boiling with the pressured energy of explosive forces confined in a small space, and with the fervor of all religious movements in their early, purist stages" (400). While Elaine admits to an ambivalence about the fervency of the feminist movement of the time (she confesses she still shaves her legs, is "hopelessly heterosexual" and a mother, all of which render her suspect in the radical, feminist art community of the time), she

also finds a community of other mothers, among whom she finds support: "I have several women friends, not very close ones. Single mothers, as I am. I meet them at preschool. We trade kids for nights out and grumble harmlessly together" (401).

Elaine also discovers that her art is now selling in galleries and gaining respect in the art world: "After a time I find that, in the tiny world of art… I am suddenly at the front of a smallish wave. There's a flurry, as such things go. More of my pictures sell, for higher prices. I'm represented by two regular galleries now, one east, one west. I go to New York, briefly, leaving Sarah with one of my single mother friends, for a group show organized by the Canadian government which is attended by many people who work with the Trade Commission" (402). And unlike Morag, who concludes *The Diviners* as a solitary artist figure, Elaine remarries, to a sensible real estate investor, Ben, and has a second daughter, Anne. Elaine succeeds not only with her artistic endeavours, but finds contentment amid a stable family life (403-404). Elaine is thus ultimately and eventually able to combine not only motherhood and artistic creation, but domestic happiness as well. Radha Chakravarty observes that "As mother and artist, Elaine contradicts the traditional idea that a woman can be either a creative artist or a mother" (117-118). McWilliams also argues persuasively that

> Atwood's characters, most particularly the authors and artists, contribute something radically new to the Kunstlerroman tradition, particularly in the way that the artist emerges as deeply involved in day-to-day living but is also capable of creating self-protecting personae that jostle for position within the text. This is far removed from the idea of the artist that Atwood encountered as a young woman, which was formed by the archetypal literary portrait of the artist. (27)

The novel concludes with her retrospective exhibition, and detailed descriptions of her most significant paintings, all of which draw from and echo people, experiences, and events from her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Unlike the ambiguity that concludes Thomas's *Intertidal Life,* or the inherent loneliness of Morag in *The Diviners,* Elaine—for all the conflicts and difficulties she encounters along the way—is ultimately a portrait of a successful mother-artist, reasonably happy with her accomplishments and with her family, and having made peace with her past.[58]

**The Domestic and the Creative: The Mother-Artist in Carol Shields's *Unless***

In the introduction to *Startle and Illuminate: Carol Shields on Writing*, a posthumous collection of Shields's essays on the art and craft of writing, her daughter and the text's editor Anne Giardini recalls her childhood being intricately woven with her mother's career as a writer: "All of us, five children… saw our mother writing, and we read her work, as she invited us to do, often at its earliest stages. As children and then teenagers we watched her type the poems that won her first prize in the CBC's Young Writer's Competition in 1964 and found publication in journals and in her own collections, and then write the novels, short stories, plays and non-fiction that earned her recognition and awards around the world" (xviii). In response to a question about the temporal practicalities of cultivating a literary career while raising five children, Shields concedes that "Everyone asks this" and responds that "I didn't have a job. I didn't write until [the children] went to school, and I didn't write on weekends and I didn't write in the evening. None

[58] The novel's conclusion involves a reunion with Jon, where they meet for dinner and then go to bed together, which is an act of forgiveness and understanding: "We make love for the comfort of it. I recognize him, I could recognize him in total darkness… In this there is the relief of greeting. I don't feel I'm being disloyal to Ben, only loyal to something else; which predates him, which has nothing to do with him" (Atwood *Cat's Eye* 390). As they lie together afterwards "under the duvet, arms around each other" Elaine reflects that "What's left is fondness, and regret. A diminuendo" (390).

of this was possible" (xxiv).[59] This tight compartmentalization of time, and approaching the work in increments, is a common theme among the biographies of Canada's mother-writers who have taken the time to reflect on the impact of their motherhood on their writing.[60] However, they were all able to capture time, energy and inspiration within their domestic or private spaces, and mobilize, empower and transform this time and space into creativity, allowing them to begin or continue to be artistically productive.

Carol Shields's final novel, *Unless* (2002), has been described as her "most explicitly feminist novel" (Stovel "Written" 221), which employs a metafictional *mise en abyme* about a mother-writer working on a novel to highlight "how the woman writer has the power to challenge, and hopefully transcend, the long-standing power structures of… literature" (Guenther 160). The novel's main protagonist, Reta Winters, is a writer and translator who is working on a new novel, while the eldest of her three teenaged daughters, Norah, has suddenly and (without apparent explanation), dropped out of university and begun living on the streets of Toronto.

---

[59] She elaborates in more detail:

> But I used to try to get that hour just before they came home from lunch… I tried to write a couple of pages. That was all I ever asked myself to do. Then sometimes, in the afternoon, before they came home from school, I would get back to those two pages, and maybe have a chance to do them over again. But I really only had about an hour or an hour and a half a day. This was how I organized my time, that I would give myself one or two pages a day, and if I didn't get to my two pages, I would get into bed at night with one of those thick yellow tablets of lined paper, and I would do two quick pages and then turn off the light. I did this for nine months, and at the end of nine months, I had a novel. I could see how it could be done in little units. (Giardini xxiv)

[60] In a 2018 article in *The Paris Review,* Canadian writer Claudia Dey recalls the experience of writing the first draft of her most recent novel "in a ten-day mania" when she was finally alone after her husband had taken their two young children on a trip without her. She describes her creative process as one wherein "I am writing—writing with the speed of an animal being chased by a larger animal. The larger animal is time. Here is the artist-mother's bar graph: line one—the multiplying size and need of her expression—held up against line two—the rapid dissolution of time. To write is to be in conversation with yourself, to preserve a state of being so you can conclude a sequence of thinking and feeling. The enemy to this process is intrusion. Children, in all of their beauty and wildness and strange genius are, in the way of a meteorite, an intrusion" (n.pag.). In order to write, Dey requires not only aloneness but space within which to be alone: "I wrote my novel in whatever empty room I could find that had a door behind me I could lock. This was the only way I could… remain in conversation with myself. Friends turned over their apartments and cabins. I left my home and worked elsewhere for six days, eight days, whatever time I could rob from my life, and then returned to taller sons and bedrooms that looked ransacked" (n.pag.).

Reta's maternal preoccupation and worry for her troubled daughter form the architecture of the plot, as she tries to parse out the reasons for Norah's withdrawal from her own and their family's lives. One of the presiding theories, espoused most vociferously by Danielle Westerman, the French philosopher and theorist whose work Reta translates into English, is that Norah has "simply succumbed to the traditional refuge of women without power: she has accepted in its stead complete powerlessness, total passivity, a kind of impotent piety" (Shields 104). It is this apparent relinquishing of agency that leads Reta to contemplate feminism as well, both Danielle's and her own, in an attempt to make sense of Norah's abdication of her life and to understand her own artistic and publishing choices. It is thus that feminism also becomes a central "object of inquiry in *Unless*" (Beckman-Long *Carol* 19), alongside motherhood and writing. Through the character of Reta, Shields affirms the possibilities of the mother-writer, a woman who does not feel that her maternal role inhibits her literary creativity, but who instead pushes back against and resists the presumed limitations espoused by interviewers and imposed by editors in the publishing industry. And by the end of the novel, she is also a mother whose daughter has returned to her, a "revision of the archetypal myth of Demeter and Kore, the mother-daughter Goddesses of Greek legend" (Stovel "Because" 54).

The novel opens with Reta's reflections on her current state of unhappiness, hinting at a significant loss with which she is currently coping (and which the reader will soon learn is her homeless daughter). As a means of self-consolation, however, Reta contemplates and chronicles her literary career—a theme her friends also employ as a means of comfort: "I have my writing. 'You have your writing!' friends say… And it's true. There *is* a curious and faintly distasteful comfort, at the age of forty-three… in contemplating what I have managed to write and publish during those impossibly childish and sunlit days before I understood the meaning of grief. 'My

Writing': this is a very small poultice to hold up against my damaged self, but better, I have been persuaded, than no comfort at all" (Shields 2). She then goes on to chronicle "what I've written so far in my life" (2) in a numbered list, which begins with "1. A translation and introduction to Danielle Westerman's book of poetry, *Isolation*, April 1981, one month before our daughter Norah was born, a home birth naturally; a midwife; you could almost hear the guitars plinking in the background" (3). This conflation of the birth of her first child with the "birth" of her first book is repeated with her second publication, "a short story that appeared in *An Anthology of Young Ontario Voices*" when she "was only twenty-nine, mother of Norah, aged four, her sister Christine, aged two, and about to give birth to Natalie—in a hospital this time" (4). Caroline Rosenthal notes that "From this list we not only learn how much Reta has published but also how deeply intertwined her work as a writer is with raising her family" (Rosenthal *New York* 196-197). The narrator explicitly reflects on this extraordinary confluence of circumstances, being a mother to three young children before the age of thirty and also nursing a burgeoning literary career: "'How did you find the time?' people used to chorus, and in that query I often registered a hint of blame: was I neglecting my darling sprogs for my writing career?" (4). And as an initial signpost in the transformation that Reta undergoes, she paradoxically undermines her own literary ambition at the same time that she is cataloguing it. She responds to her own rhetorical question about neglecting her children in the negative: "Well, no. I never thought in terms of career. I dabbled in writing. It was my macramé, my knitting. Not long after, however, I did start to get serious and joined a local 'writers' workshop' for women" (4). Reta's defense of combining child-raising with creative writing is modeled, initially, on a self-denigrating refusal to take her writing seriously, but in the same sentence, she admits that she *did* take it seriously

enough to join a community of other women writers to help hone her craft.[61] She also reveals that her third publication, a second short story, came of her experience in the workshop, followed by more translations of Danielle Westerman's work, namely her memoirs and essays. During a month spent in France with her family, taken thanks to the success of one of her Westerman translations, Reta comes to a realization that she wants to expand her creative possibilities and move beyond translations and short stories into longer fiction: "I sat in a wicker chair in the flower-filled courtyard, shorts and halter and bare feet, a floppy straw hat on my head, reading novels day after day, and thinking: I want to write a novel. About something happening. About characters moving against a 'there.' That's what I really wanted to do" (11).

Immediately following this declaration, Reta remarks that, "Looking back, I can scarcely believe in such innocence. I didn't think about our girls growing older and leaving home and falling away from us. Norah had been a good, docile baby and then she became a good, obedient little girl. Now, at nineteen, she's so brimming with goodness that she sits on a Toronto street corner, which has its own textual archaeology" (11). The natural slippage between the arc of her career and her motherhood reveals the extent to which her creative life and her identity as a mother are continuously correlated throughout the text. This blend of comfortable domesticity and artistic endeavour are intimately intermingled. Entering the local library one afternoon, Reta imagines what the staff and other patrons must be thinking when they recognize her:

> No one actually stares, but they know who I am. I'm Reta Winters, the doctor's wife (that fine man!), the mother of three daughters, the writer. I live five miles out of town… In our big old house, it could be said, we live the life we long ago chose: abundant, bustling,

[61] Rosenthal argues that this textual, micro-irony is one of the defining features of Shields's *Unless.* She writes that Shields makes "Reta a believable character but an unreliable narrator, who through her verbal idiosyncrasies provides the reader with indirect information about herself, a mirror commentary underlies *Unless*" (Rosenthal "Textual" 175).

> but with peaceful intervals, islands of furniture, books, music, soft cushions to lean into, food in the fridge, more in the freezer. I work as a writer and translator (French into English). And I am the mother of Norah Winters, such a sad case. (43)

Once again, Reta subtly underplays her own artistic life, even as she reveals how the material spaces of her home become sites for literary creation: "The room where I work is the old box room in the attic… not officially a room, though the new skylight and cunningly suspended bookshelves make it feel like one. My office is what I call this space, or else my cubby—or, more often, the box room. My life as a writer and translator is my back story, as they say in the movie business; my front story is that I live in this house on a hill with Tom and our girls and our seven-year-old golden retriever, Pet" (50). Fiona Tolan argues that this incisive elucidation of the quotidian and the domestic is central to the novel's feminist politics, "that *Unless* contemplates but ultimately resists a feminist trajectory from home to the wider world, housework to career; instead, a woman's writing and the domestic remain determinedly entangled" (3).[62]

---

[62] Tolan goes on to explore the extent to which Reta's confessed pleasure in caring for her home becomes, in itself, a feminist act. She argues that "the trope of housework in *Unless* becomes a means of challenging proscriptive feminisms and resisting the negation of pleasure and desire within second-wave discourse on the home" (2). Reta's home is the space where she undertakes her creative work, and where she nurtures her family, two elements of her life that are deeply interrelated, the home being the material space where both coexist. Reta also connects her desire to clean and tidy her house with her maternal worry for her daughter: "I'm not so thick that I can't put the pieces of my odd obsession together, wood and bone, plumbing and blood… I dust and polish this house of mine so that I'll be able to seal it from damage. If I commit myself to its meticulous care, I will claim back my daughter Norah" (61). Reta then reflects on conversations she has had with Westerman, who Nora Foster Stovel describes as "the feminist pole of the narrative" ("Because" 54), about the supposedly oppressive nature of housework. Tolan acknowledges the echoes of de Beauvoir in Westerman's perspective (6), although once again, Shields's use of textual irony appears to undermine even Westerman's more radical views: "Danielle Westerman and I have discussed the matter of housework. Not surprisingly, she, always looking a little *dérisoire,* believes that women have been enslaved by their possessions. Acquiring and then tending—these eat up a woman's creativity, anyone's creativity. But I've watched the way she arranges articles on a shelf, and how carefully she sets a table, even when it is just me coming into Toronto to have lunch in her sunroom" (Shields 62). Here, the narrator subtly and ironically undermines Westerman's Beauvoirian resistance to housework by revealing that she too takes pride in the meaningful objects in her home, and in the satisfaction of a beautifully laid table for her guests. Tolan suggests that this attention to domestic detail is "a process rooted firmly in female lived experience" and that "[i]n this plethora of purposes, Shields takes her text beyond both second-wave dismissal of the home as a site of female oppression and postfeminist celebrations of domesticity as liberative irony; both [of which]… underestimate the potential depths of the seemingly mundane" (9).

As Reta's tally of her publications at the outset of the novel reveals, despite being responsible for virtually all the domestic tasks, from cleaning to meal preparation to child-rearing,[63] Reta has managed to cultivate a career for herself, and one over which she increasingly takes agency as the novel unfolds. And yet, this is part of her material and imaginative world, one that allows her the freedom to create and write: "These human mysteries—cleaning my house, fantasizing about the lives of other people—keep me company, keep me alert. But more than anything else it is the rhythm of typing-and-thinking that soothes me, what is almost an athlete's delight in the piling of clause on clause. Who would have thought this old habit of mine would become a strategy for maintaining a semblance of ongoing life, an unasked-for gift" (108-109). She acknowledges the extent to which the routine tasks of daily life provide a sort of companionship and awareness, but reveals that she is most comforted and fortified by her work. She describes it as a gift and a way to keep her going through the difficulty of Norah's estrangement. She continues, "On days when I don't know which foot to put in front of the other, I can type my way toward becoming a conscious being" (109).

And importantly, this growing sense of agency and creative vitality, as Reta begins to take her fiction writing more seriously, develops in tandem with a newly urgent feminist politics. Attempting to grapple with her daughter's sudden dereliction on the streets, Reta searches for answers within herself, and within her remembered conversations with Danielle Westerman, the fiercest feminist she knows.[64] Reta arrives at the conclusion that part of Norah's crisis stems

---

[63] She observes that

> For more than twenty years I've been responsible for producing three meals a day for the several individuals I live with. I may not be conscious of this obligation, but surely I must always, at some level, be calculating and apportioning the amount of food in the house and the number of bodies to be fed: Tom and the girls, the girls' friends, my mother-in-law, and various passing acquaintances. And then there's the dog to feed, and water for his bowl by the back door. (84)

[64] At one point Reta describes her reverently as "Dr. Westerman: poet, essayist, feminist survivor, holder of twenty-seven honorary degrees" (62-63) and later as "feminist pioneer, Holocaust survivor, cynic, and genius" (97).

from women's oppression under patriarchy. She thinks back through her female lineage, and sees in all her antecedents a particularly fatal kind of silence: "I thought of my three daughters and my mother-in-law and my own dead mother with her slack charms and the need she had to relax by painting china. Not one of us was going to get what we wanted. I had suspected this for years, and now I believe that Norah half knows the big female secret of wanting and not getting. Norah, the brave soldier. Imagine someone writing a play called *Death of a Saleswoman.* What a joke" (97).[65] She then recalls a television interview she watched recently with an eminent, fictional male author, who was unable to name a single female author who influenced him, beyond remarking that the nineteenth century had some notable women writers. Caroline Rosenthal observes that "In different contexts Reta experiences how women are literally cut out of cultural memory by being omitted from canon-making lists, encyclopedia articles, or any other form of recording greatness" (*New York* 202). But with Danielle Westerman, Reta is able to find a kinship, both as women and as feminists too: "We're two women *au fond*—this is how [Danielle] frequently expresses the intellectual gas that surrounds and binds our separate energies—and each of us is equipped with women's elemental anatomy, women's plumbing and deployment of soft tissue, with women's merciless cycles that bring on surprisingly similar attacks of inquietude. In addition, the two of us share a love for the hard bite of language" (103). And yet, Reta also acknowledges a distance between them: "But her life is not my life. She's worked harder and been braver because she's had to" (103). And of her children, Reta also acknowledges a gap in Danielle's understanding of her maternal relationship with her children,

[65] Reta continues, adamant about the continued exclusion of women from the literary canon, from spheres of influence and power, and from actualizing their own desires. She writes, "I need to speak further about this problem of women, how they are dismissed and excluded from the most primary of entitlements. *But we've come so far*; that's the thinking. So far compared with fifty or a hundred years ago. Well, no, we've arrived at the new millennium and we haven't 'arrived' at all. We've been sent over to the side pocket of the snooker table and made to disappear" (99).

as she is not a mother herself: "[my] three daughters; she knows each of them, and loves them fully, but has no real idea of my investment in their lives, how my body, my consciousness, has never, even for a moment, been separated from them" (103-104).

Reta refuses to respond to Norah's crisis and her own literary career with passivity. As the narrative progresses, she undergoes a transformative understanding of the necessity for feminism and finds a growing purpose in her literary career. The metafictional elements of the novel, where Shields is writing about a woman writing (whose character, Alicia, is also a magazine writer), provides insights into the empowering possibilities of literary creativity. Reta reflects, "I… am aware of being in incestuous waters, a woman writer who is writing about a woman writer who is writing… I am focusing on the stirrings of the writerly impulse… of a life spent affixing small words to large, empty pages. We may pretend otherwise, but to many writers this is the richest territory we can imagine… This matters, the remaking of an untenable world through the nib of a pen; it matters so much I can't stop doing it" (Shields 208). Reta affirms the necessity of women's writing as a means of resisting patriarchal oppression, and thus as a means of making sense of her own daughter's social disintegration.[66]

The novel concludes somewhat paradoxically. Reta arrives at a full realization of the relative powerlessness of women, and her daughter Norah returns home, reintegrating into the fabric of her family's life and their domestic spaces. And though Norah's return provides a

---

[66] Tolan observes that "Over the course of *Unless,* Reta begins to tentatively but cumulatively construct a grand narrative of female displacement, making spiralling connections between housework, women's work, and women's writing" (9). Bethany Guenther goes further, arguing that Shields's focus on the importance of women's work, and in the case of her main protagonist Reta, literary work, reveals its empowering and emancipatory possibilities: "Work… *is* often the whole point for Shields's characters, a point that takes on great urgency and power when she is depicting artistic or creative work as a woman's means of transcendence or transformation" (149). And Guenther asserts that *Unless* serves as the pinnacle of this preoccupation in Shields's oeuvre, arguing that "the feminist crescendo of Shields's consideration of women and work is found in *Unless*, a poignant contemplation of female powerlessness and the potential power of the female writer" (149).

particular resolution to one of the central conflicts of the text—the mother's lost daughter—Reta has undergone an ideological transformation as a result of her journey. Not only has she come to a greater awareness of her own feminism, her literary ambitions have expanded and shifted as well. She realizes, in part, that the heroine of her latest novel, Alicia, must form the centre of her own narrative.[67] Just before Norah's return, Reta reveals the crux of what she has come to believe:

> that the world is split in two, between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang. That's the problem. (Shields 269-270)

Her condescending, older male editor from New York comes to visit to discuss her new novel, and convince her to shift the "moral centre" of her novel to her male protagonist (285), a suggestion which Reta immediately registers as patriarchal. "It's because she's a woman," Reta realizes. She insists on this very realization, repeating it four times (285-287), in response to his ineffective and loquacious denials. And it is at this moment, at the culmination of Reta's understanding of and confrontation with the patriarchal nature of literary and publishing culture, that she receives a phone call from her husband that Norah has been hospitalized with pneumonia. Her hospitalization is thus the conduit back into the fold of her family, and they discover also the cause of her crisis, which is an incident where a Muslim woman self-immolated

---

[67] In one of the novel's many metafictional turns, this parallels the same way Shields has centred Reta's voice and subjectivity throughout the narrative.

on the street and Norah tried, in vain, to beat out the flames.[68] As Reta watches her daughter sleeping in the hospital, she reflects on the novel she is in the middle of writing, and affirms the primacy of her daughter over her artistic creation: "I sat in my chair and kept my eyes on Norah's face. My thoughts drifted briefly to Alicia and Roman [the characters of her novel]… I realized I didn't care what happened to them. Their lives were ephemeral; they could be moved about like beads of mercury. I didn't need them anymore. They were undeserving of anyone's attention, least of all mine" (305). In this passage, we see the extent to which Reta relied on her literary creativity to buoy her during her daughter's absence, and also the privileging of real life over that of art, a subversion of the traditional, Romantic (and masculine) devotion to art to the exclusion of life's messy materiality. Here, Reta affirms the importance of the tangibility and corporeality of her life, the intimacy of her family and her maternity.

Once Norah is released from the hospital, Reta reveals that in fact she has, despite her disavowals, finished her novel. She explains,

> Meanwhile… I have brought *Thyme in Bloom* [the title of her novel] to a whimsical conclusion—Alicia triumphs, but in her own slightly capricious way—and the book will be published in early fall. Everything is neatly wrapped up at the end, since tidy conclusions are a convention of comic fiction, as we all know. I have bundled up each of the loose narrative strands, but what does such fastidiousness mean? It doesn't mean that all will be well for ever and ever, amen; it means that for five minutes a balance has been achieved at the margin of the novel's thin textual plane; make that five seconds; make

[68] The symbolic and thematic significance of the unnamed Muslim woman's self-immolation are explored by Hannah McGregor in "Reading Closely: Discursive Frames and Technological Mediations in Carol Shields' *Unless,*" *Canadian Literature 217* (Summer 2013): 35-52, and by Esra Melikoglu in "*Unless:* A Covert Post-Colonial and Transnational Gothic Novel, Or The Haunted House (of Fiction) Is Falling Apart," *Studies in Canadian Literature 40.2* (2015): 211-225.

> that the millionth part of a nanosecond. The uncertainty principle; did anyone ever believe otherwise? (317-318)

Reta undermines her own "happy ending" by revealing the extent to which such happiness, and such endings, are provisional and temporary. However, the terminology used to describe the conclusion of Reta's novel, a vocabulary of neatness, tidiness and "fastidiousness," echoes her frantic and obsessive housecleaning. Shields thus weaves together, once again, the domestic with the literary; the tidiness of her novel mimics the material neatness of her home. And as it turns out, Reta's self-professed "comic" novel is being taken seriously by critics and scholars, garnering an article in *The Yale Review* which describes it as "a brilliant tour de force" (318).

As a result, Reta's ambition continues to grow as she contemplates her third novel: "It will open to a wide range of formal expression. I want the book to have the low moaning tone of an orchestral trombone and then to move upward toward a transfiguration of some kind, the nature of which has yet to be worked out. I want it to be a book that's willing to live in one room if necessary. I want it to hold still like an oil painting, a painting titled: *Seated Woman. Woman at Rest*" (319-320). Reta imagines a literary aesthetic that captures the domestic, "a book that's willing to live in one room if necessary," and with a woman at its centre, still and in focus. But this simplicity belies a greater complexity, with her conjuring of "an orchestral trombone" and then a movement "upwards toward a transfiguration." Like Shields the author, Reta wants to capture the transcendent within the details of the everyday and has begun to take herself seriously as a writer and a creator, gesturing towards her own identity as a woman writing, and valuing it anew. While she had regarded her just-completed novel as something light and frivolous, critics have apparently seen within it something more profound, and as a result, she reveals that with her next book, her aims will be more artistic, serious and contemplative. She is

also committed to privileging the experience and subjectivity of her female heroine: "my Alicia is intelligent and inventive and capable of moral resolution, the same qualities we presume, without demonstration, in a male hero. It will be a sadder book than the others, and shorter… A certain amount of resignation, too, will attach itself to the pages of this third novel… but also the heft of stamina. There you have it: stillness and power, sadness and resignation, contradictions and irrationality. Almost, you might say, the materials of a serious book" (320).

And finally, at the heart of this newfound ambition and self-assertion is the return of Norah. The concluding paragraph of *Unless* is a vision of Norah, safe within the embrace of her family: "Day by day Norah is recovering at home, awakening atom by atom, and shyly planning her way on a conjectural map. It is bliss to see… She may do science next fall at McGill, or else linguistics. She is still considering this" (320). Reta reveals that she is the only one awake in her home, comforted by the presence of her entire family, all her children: "Right now she is sleeping. They are all sleeping, even Pet, sprawled on the kitchen floor, warm in his beautiful coat of fur. It is after midnight, late in the month of March" (320). Shields thus concludes her *Unless* on a warm vision of home, a domestic space that allows for both creativity (as one assumes she is writing at her desk) and maternal care.

In a wide-ranging interview with Eleanor Wachtel upon the publication of *Unless*, Shields reflects on the motivations for and preoccupations of her final novel. She explains that "I like to think of this book on these four little legs: this idea of mothers and children; the idea of writers and readers" (Wachtel *Random* 163). This quadrangle of intentions unites the concepts of mothers and writers, children and readers, acknowledging the intimate relationships among them. As a writer whose work was frequently derided, particularly in the early years of her career, for its "repeated explorations of the lives of women in (largely happy) traditional domestic

situations" (Guenther 148), in her final full-length work of fiction Shields appears to double-down on what she views as the potency and importance of women's intimate, domestic and creative selves. With *Unless*, Shields reveals that she wanted to explore many of the still unspoken joys of women's lives: "I wanted to write about the unsentimental love of children, the strong ties that we don't express. We don't express the idea of these ties very often in words, but you see it everywhere, the intensity between parents and children. I wanted to write about that" (Wachtel *Random* 174-175). At the same time, Shields also explained how she was interested in the status of women writers in the contemporary moment: "And, of course, I wanted to write about the acceptance of women into literature on their own terms. I don't think this has happened… and how are we going to make it happen? We're going to have to change what we think of as literature, to a certain extent, in order for women to be fully felt, I think, in our writing" (175). Furthermore, she acknowledges the unique specificity of women's writing, as an entity distinct from what has traditionally been considered literature or literary: "their work is an oeuvre; it has a different shape to it, and it's not going to fit with the old formula of novels. Women's writing is going to remake our literature and make it whole, I think" (175).

**Indigenous Motherhood in Jeannette Armstrong's *Whispering in Shadows***

Indigenous motherhood is distinct from the Western, hegemonic ideology that defines and delimits dominant conceptions of motherhood, inflected as it is by a cultural legacy that stretches back thousands of years, by a painful history of colonialism and by ongoing resistances to colonial domination. As such, for many Indigenous women, motherhood is not necessarily experienced as the oppressive institution that de Beauvoir, Friedan, and Rich rail against so determinedly. And while it is an admittedly impossible proposition to generalize about a

population as linguistically and culturally diverse as the Indigenous peoples of North America, it is possible nonetheless to identify "some common themes within the experiences of Indigenous mothering across the globe" (Lavell-Harvard and Anderson 2). According to D. Memee Lavell-Harvard and Kim Anderson, "Indigenous mothering is, in essence, about something much larger, and much older, and much more empowering" (2) and that it is, in fact, Indigenous peoples' "shared experience of exclusion from society that provides a fertile ground for the revitalization and maintenance of empowering mothering practices" (2). In Indigenous communities, motherhood has traditionally been experienced as a source of power and strength: "Arising out of our role as mothers, as the givers of life, the role of Indigenous women is to care for and nurture life once it is brought into the world and, by extension, to care for and nurture our nations" (3). Lavell-Harvard and Anderson go on to note that "unlike western ideologies that denied women decision-making power in the family and positioned them in a role equivalent to a family servant, Indigenous mothers historically had responsibility for the life they created and, by extension, for the whole family and the entire community" (3). This status afforded women both responsibility and authority, and the ability to undertake important decisions in their communities (3).[69]

This empowered vision of motherhood which has endured among Indigenous mothers despite generations of colonial trauma and disruption,[70] is an integral part of Jeannette

---

[69] Sana Z. Shahram elaborates further, explaining that "The majority of Indigenous cultures were matrilineal" (14) and "Politically, Indigenous women enjoyed sweeping powers: they ran local clan councils, ran funerals, nominated and impeached all political representatives, appointed warriors, declared war, negotiated peace, and mediated disputes" (15). Furthermore, "Women… controlled the economy through the distribution of wealth and inheritance, and acted as the heart and the head of their family units" (15).

[70] Jaime Cidro and Hannah Tait Neufeld explain that "As nations such as Canada formed and became colonized, authorities saw traditional Indigenous gender roles as an impediment to successful colonization. The forced rearrangements of these gender roles disrupted families structures, namely because they removed women from places of power. As common law became the foundation for law in colonized countries, Indigenous women quickly

Armstrong's second novel, *Whispering in Shadows*, which is centred on the life of Penny Jackson, a painter, mother, environmentalist and Indigenous rights activist. Described as a semi-autobiographical novel (Srivastava 232), Armstrong's *kunstlerroman* interrogates the political purposes and possibilities of artistic creation, emphasizes the profound human need for community, and the intimate and integral interconnectedness of human life and the ecological balance of the natural world.[71] *Whispering in Shadows* is a deeply environmentalist text, emphasizing above all else the need to re-establish an ecological balance with the earth, eschewing capitalist exploitation and expansion. Penny's paintings are, at first, inspired by the natural world and become more and more political as her career progresses and she chronicles the human suffering wrought by environmental destruction, particularly the ways in which this impacts Indigenous communities throughout the Americas.

Penny is also a single mother to three children, who she raises alone (and later in the text, with the support of her large family back in her Indigenous, Okanagan community) while continuing to paint, write and work as an activist. Penny does not experience any fundamental conflict between her creativity and her role as a mother, likely due to the fact that "For centuries, strength, independence, and self-reliance have defined [Indigenous] mothers" (Lavell-Harvard and Anderson 6). Furthermore, "Having had to learn how to resist subjugation and how to survive under the weight of oppression… generations of Indigenous mothers have maintained a

---

lost their social and legal status and became dependent on fathers and then on husbands… which reinforced patriarchy and paternalism" (2).

[71] Armstrong admits that she herself wanted to be a painter, remarking at the 1983 conference, *In the Feminine: Women and Words*, "While growing up, I had really intended to become an artist" ("Writing" 55). This revelation reinforces many of the autobiographical elements of the novel. Furthermore, Armstrong connects her decision to become a writer instead of a painter with the need to speak truth to power, to correct colonial misapprehensions and misunderstandings of Indigenous peoples: "in all the magazines and books I read, I found a certain element was missing. A certain truth and reality was missing from all the things I read concerning Indian people, and that bothered me. I started writing by accident; actually, I started answering back" (55).

definition of womanhood and mothering premised upon strength and capability that was distinctly different from the negative images and subservient female role offered by mainstream society" (5). Penny's children appear intermittently in the narrative, when Penny is pregnant with her first child, again when they are already teenagers, when Penny is worrying about her eldest's recent misbehaviour and drug-use, and towards the end when she returns to her Okanagan community. Her children are presented as co-existent with her artistic career, however Penny does experience a sense of conflict with her eldest daughter, who is a source of worry and preoccupation, and who occasionally openly challenges Penny's prioritizing of her career as both an artist and an activist.

In the opening scene of the novel, Penny is seventeen years old and painting an image of snow: "To her the snow looks yellow and silver grey in some places. Blue and mauve in others. It's definitely not white. Penny's hand, holding the rolled up, almost empty tube of white paint, stops. She picks up the brush again and dabs it into the yellow, smoothing it over into the thick off-white smear on the plastic board" (Armstrong 8). This attention to the material details of Penny's surroundings is a consistent feature of the text, with focuses on colours and textures, shade and light. It is part of her vocation as a painter to be so attuned to these particularities. The narrative then shifts into Penny's thoughts, a recurrent event in the novel: "*The sun on snow. And the shadows. It's tricky. How can I ever get it to look like that? The clean sparkle. It looks so buttery and warm, yet it sparkles. What do I want to get it like that for anyway? Why? It's talking to me that's why. It's singing. It sounds like an under-the-breath Indian song*" (8). From the very beginning of the novel, "Penny is a young artist concerned with the difficult process of translating the colours and images she experiences in the visible world into the language of substance on canvas" (Haladay 34). That she also connects her creativity to her Indigeneity,

through the colours' "under-the-breath Indian song," is equally significant, gesturing as it does toward an integration of the material world and Okanagan systems of belief and understanding. Jane Haladay notes that "[t]he visual nature of Armstrong's text, with its painter protagonist as the most prominent embodiment of response to visual patterning, imagery, and colour, allows for Armstrong's act of multiple translations through Okanagan understandings that eschew narrow Western categories urging separations" (35). Penny's experiences and perspectives capture a "dynamic synthesis" (35) that bring multiple, typically disparate possibilities together. I argue that one of these many possibilities generated through this synthesis in the text is that of the mother-artist, as by page 15, the young artist Penny reveals in a letter to her cousin Roberta that she's unexpectedly pregnant. Penny writes, "I thought I would drop a few lines to tell you first from people at home. Don't tell mom 'til I tell her okay, please? I'm gonna have a baby! Yeah. I don't really know what to think of that. If this is a girl I want a new kinda name for her. Not some same old name. We're living in a new generation now. I want her to be able to be free of the same old, same old. You know? I'm kinda looking forward to it" (Armstrong 15).

After her relationship to her children's father, Francis, ends (like many of the other mother-artists of contemporary Canadian literature, Penny also encounters conflict with her romantic partner and co-parent), Penny expresses hope about her future, affirms her artistic ambitions and tries to work up the courage to apply to the Fine Arts program at the local university. She ruminates to herself, "*All I want is to try. I hate most not knowing if my art is good, bad or ugly. I hate the way I think about all the things that are happening and wanting to paint something about it… Why couldn't I just be normal and resigned to things?*" (42). Penny realizes that despite her insecurities, she is driven to paint and driven also by the struggles she witnesses in the world around her, and her desire to express her sense of injustice in her art. And

while she herself admits in another letter (to her friend Donna) that she is struggling with basic survival for herself and her kids, she remains determined to finish her university degree and continue to paint:

> I was sitting up late typing on this old typewriter and thought it was about time I let you know I'm doing the college thing… The painting and printmaking courses are just about the best thing I have ever done in my life… Times are tough so I can't come home for Christmas. Send some care package stuff, instead of presents. Beans, rice and flour. The Indian education allowance doesn't get past the middle of the month after rent and the kids' other needs, never mind gas, books and art supplies. You gotta be an economist to stretch what I stretch. I wouldn't trade this for anything right now, though. (59)

Regardless of the difficulties of basic survival for herself and her children, Penny affirms her joy in studying art and preparing herself for her artistic vocation. She is resilient and resourceful, and refuses to let economic hardship diminish her sense of accomplishment and self-realization. Her commitment to her vocation as an artist is so powerful that it often overshadows even her maternal obligations and responsibilities. As she explains to her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend, Glen, "My art dominates everything. Even me. I mean being a mom and with other family too" (72). She goes on to explain, "I do my best with the kids. I have to. And I'd die for them, but even there, a part of me resents the burden. It's like having two heads. One is trying to think and do everyday stuff and the other is off on another plane, whispering or yelling stuff at me" (72). The insistence of her inner artistic voice battles for attention with the other part of her who must undertake the daily tasks of caring for three young children, and even while she affirms the most primal of impulses in her willingness to die for her children, she reveals that even there, there is an insistent and creative part of her that resists it.

The most extended passage wherein we are invited into Penny's life as a mother and her relationship with her children is when she brings them with her to an Indigenous environmentalist festival where she is a keynote speaker and her eldest, Shanna, is bitterly complaining about being there at all: "Mom, can't we just go back to Vancouver? It's so dusty and hot here. And look at all the cars… Why do we have to be here all weekend anyway? You only got half an hour tomorrow, for your talk. Look at all those old timers with beards and beads!... It just seems like we always have to go to these things. It's boring. I'd rather be in Vancouver." (85) They set up their camp site where they will be staying for the weekend, and Shanna continues her protests, "Mom, what do we do now?... It's so boring here. I wish you didn't have to drag us over here. I just want to do normal stuff. I hate all this activist stuff. How come you have to do this stuff?" (89). Penny contemplates her teenage daughter, covered in make-up and wearing a "lime green mini-dress with a wide white plastic belt" and replies, "Shan, I already told you. It's part of what I do. My artwork is about the environment. This is an important talk for me. I'll get to make some good connections here. I think you should give it a chance, before you judge it" (89). Penny reveals the extent to which the talk is not only important to her activist work, but to her art as well, as her "artwork is about the environment" (89). But Shanna will not be appeased, at least not at first. She shouts, "You don't care about us! You just don't want me to have any fun. I don't want to be here! Dustin doesn't either. Of course, Merrilee, the big baby, she'll do anything… I hate you!" (89). Finally, though, Penny gets Shanna to calm down, Shanna apologizes, and the four of them go for a swim in a lake nearby, re-establishing a vague sense of balance and peace: "As they walk to the lake, the breeze picks up and suddenly whips a small dust devil across their path… The lake is shining and still… The lake's smoothness is momentarily ruffled by the whirling funnel. Like a small mouth, it

sucks a fine spray of rainbow before sinking quietly back down into the sun speckled surface" (91). Armstrong highlights the intense conflict that erupts between Penny and her eldest daughter, alongside a family swim in a lovely lake, suggesting the extent to which their experiences oscillate between the painful and beautiful. The narrative captures this duality, revealing the extent to which Penny is made to pay emotionally for her artistic vocation through her children's anger. However, as the novel progresses, Penny ultimately discovers that reconnecting with her extended family and moving back to her Indigenous community with her children is a pathway to healing, particularly for her eldest.

Of Penny's three children, Shanna is the one that receives the most attention in the narrative; certainly she is the child who preoccupies her mother the most. Penny worries about her friends, her drug use, her general rebelliousness and discontentedness. Later in the novel, when Penny is at a gallery opening of a new exhibition of her art, she finds herself alone at the end of the night with an agent from a gallery in Portland, and while they discuss some of her more striking paintings, Penny is secretly worrying about the two-hour drive home, and the fact that Shanna is not answering the phone: "*I hope Shan's doing okay. I'll just head home right after this. I wonder why she didn't answer the phone earlier. I'll just call again before I take off*" (125). Penny drives home in the rain and finds Shanna at home with a group of friends, smoking drugs in the bathroom.

It is this incident which motivates Penny to leave Vancouver and move back home to her traditional Okanagan territory on the reserve, to surround herself and her children with a larger community of family and friends. In a letter to her friend Josalie, Penny explains that, "I'm moving home. I'm tired of the kind of life out here. Actually it's that maybe I made a mistake… I've alienated my children along with myself from something valuable and I'm afraid. I'm

having some problems with my daughter, Shanna… I'm worried. I can't handle this alone anymore" (130). Penny needs her community and her family to help centre herself as a mother and bring healing to her family. As Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn observes of Indigenous mothers, "Though we have been impacted by colonization, we have also been resilient in remaining connected umbilically to the lands from where our ancestors came or have settled… This connection includes the acknowledgment that there are core values that ties us to our places, communities, and families" (68). Minthorn goes on to argue that healing and restoration are integral to Indigenous motherhood: "Because Indigenous motherhood is healing, it carries with it the remembrance of the events that shaped our families and communities. It also includes making decisions about where our children will be enrolled as tribal citizens, where they will grow up, how connected to family and community they will be, and how we will ensure they are confident and strong in their own identities" (69). In returning to her community of origin in the Okanagan, Penny is seeking to re-establish the connectivity to kin and the land. Furthermore, Penny's career as an artist, rather than being a hinderance or complication, actually facilitates this transition in their lives: "Now that I have my degree and I have some teaching credits, I think I could make a sensible living teaching art at home. My paintings are still doing fine and I do a lot of talks, so there is no reason I couldn't. Anyway, I miss the people on the rez. I miss the big gatherings and… the ceremonies. I miss going out to pick berries and canning fruit and planting. I miss the land" (131).[72]

---

[72] Minthorn argues for the importance of this connection to place and land, asking rhetorically, "how… do we help our children remain umbilically connected to their homes, relations, and culture? One of the ways that we can do this is to visit home as much as possible" since "it is rewarding for our children to know the mountains, water, and the feeling of home in the places in which we grew up" (72). In this way, "we can also ensure that they participate in the cultural ceremonies in our communities, including the first food ceremonies, receive their Indian/tribal names, know the dances, and recognize the songs performed at home" (72). Minthorn concludes, "As Indigenous mothers, we are responsible for our children and that their children know where home is and the culture, land, and sacredness that are tied to it" (72).

As Penny reveals to her long-term partner, David, the move back to the Okanagan and to her ancestral lands has been good for her children: "I've been spending a lot of time with the girls showing them stuff I should have made sure I did earlier… [Shanna] seems to be settling down quite a bit. I don't want to make any more mistakes with them" (144). Later in the text, when David encourages her to become more deeply involved in environmental and Indigenous activism, Penny agrees, explaining that "I feel more on solid ground with my kids. They seem to be taking root in the community and I have this big, big family surrounding them now. They won't slide away easily, anymore" (190). Penny's desire for community, and the importance of reconnecting her children with their Indigenous traditions, also has its echoes in the ways that Indigenous motherhood is experienced, as "interdependent supportive networks of kin have shaped Indigenous motherhood; the legacy of which continues to influence our collective experience today" (Lavell-Harvard and Anderson 6).

In a letter to her friend Tannis, Penny expresses gratitude for her children, viewing them as one of the definitively "right" choices she made in her life. While she yearns for artistic expression and longs to change an unjust world, she reveals that her children are one of the best things that have happened to her: "I'm thankful at least for having blindly let my biological process lead me to a right place, in having my three kids, though I am guilty of not being the best of mothers" (229). She feels grateful for her children, in being led there by her biology, however she also acknowledges her failings, that she has not always been the ideal or "best" mother. Towards the end of the novel, and nearing the end of Penny's life (as we will soon discover, she is dying from a rare form of cancer), she reveals that she is now a grandmother. She catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror and notices her greying hair: "*White strands of hair. I'm a*

*grandmother, too. I wonder how Shana is making out with her little ones. Jeyd and Raella. What a sweet, sweet boy. And that girl so chirpy and bright! My grandchildren*" (235).

Jeannette Armstrong, considered Canada's first Indigenous female novelist (O'Neill and Boyle 3), explores the nature of art and the life of the woman artist in *Whispering in Shadows*. In her main protagonist Penny, she creates an artist whose motherhood is not antithetical to her ability to paint and create. While Penny ruminates on the tension between her desire for autonomy and solitude and her rich and fulfilling role as a mother to her three children, neither endeavour renders the other impossible or unthinkable. While Penny may meditate on the tightrope she feels she must walk in order to paint and mother, the muted presence of her children in the text allows for a full exploration of artistry, Indigeneity and environmentalism, where motherhood is just one of many aspects of Penny's rich life, but not its defining role or characteristic. There is a certain degree of second-wave-era liberation in this perspective, where a woman is more than, and transcends her, maternal function, and where her motherhood is certainly not the most prominent or interesting part of her life. Part of this approach to the maternal lies in traditional Indigenous worldviews which celebrate motherhood as a source of power and wisdom, rather than as an oppressive patriarchal institution that limits women's opportunities. Overall, Armstrong's narrative is far more preoccupied with Penny as artist and activist than Penny as mother. Notwithstanding, the novel functions as a powerful example of the multiple possibilities and positionalities of the mother-artist in the contemporary era.

**The Integral Maternal in Suzanne Buffam's *A Pillow Book***

Suzanne Buffam's third poetry collection, *A Pillow Book,* is a series of prose-poems and list-poems that meander through a kaleidoscope of themes, from Sei Shōnagon's ancient Japanese text (of which Buffam also makes eponymous use) to insomnia, the history of pillows, witty word-plays which meditate on the oddities of modern life, artistic rivalry, performance anxiety, and motherhood. It is the latter theme with which I am preoccupied in my analysis, however, its easy coexistence with this myriad of other themes is what makes the text an emblematic expression of maternal space, wherein the author's experiences of motherhood are coexistent with her other creative explorations. Rather than being forced into a limiting either/or binary, where motherhood must be pushed aside and evaded entirely in order to make room for art, Buffam makes space for her daughter and her maternal identity in her work.

In a 2017 interview, Buffam reveals the origins of the text lay in her early experiences of motherhood, explaining that "This book took shape during the disorienting dawn of my new life as a mother. I'd say my primary concerns at that time, on the conscious level anyway, basically boiled down to the two essential questions of motherhood: how not to kill the baby, and how to get a good night's sleep" (Olstein n.pag.). She goes on to explain that the list-poems came to her first, "Perhaps not surprisingly" since "during the interminable, bleary years of early parenthood… complete thoughts eluded me, to say nothing of complex sentences" (n.pag.). Instead, "I was writing nothing but lists in those days—lists of diapers, feedings, groceries, first words" (n.pag.). However, what at first may have appeared mundane and uninteresting, became instead the genesis of *A Pillow Book*: "I found that if I squinted, and if I held them at the proper distance, in the dying light of my headlamp on my pillow before dawn, [the lists] bore a passing resemblance to poems" (n.pag.). Buffam further describes how she decided to use the recurrent

image or theme of the pillow as a structuring principle: "I applied one flimsy formal gimmick to the shaping of these blocks. Each pillow-shaped paragraph in the book, I decided, would have to contain the word 'pillow' at least once" (n.pag). At the same time, she "picked up Sei Shōnagon's 11th century Heian *Pillow Book*… and discovered that these two distinct forms—the lists and the paragraphs—were parts of an ancient Japanese 'formless form'" (n.pag.).[73]

Beyond the obvious intertextuality with and referentiality to Shōnagon's thousand-year-old text, Buffam's work is also intimately bound up with her motherhood, in both its genesis and in the recurrent appearances of her daughter, referred to as "Her Majesty" throughout the collection. When asked about her research into pillows and ancient Japanese court life, references to which populate *A Pillow Book*, Buffam explains that she did most of her research while at home with her young daughter: "I prefer, whenever possible, to stay home. Having a child, in that respect, has suited me perfectly. I did extensive research for this book, and spent untold hours of my daughter's infancy and toddlerhood down the rabbit hole of promotional videos, medical forums, museum catalogues, chat rooms, outdated encyclopedias, listicles and scholarly articles from digital archives around the world, all without setting foot beyond my slippers" (Cody n.pag.). She also explains the ways in which her daughter's presence accompanied her through the writing of *A Pillow Book*, recalling that "It was written in conversation with a thousand-year-dead Heian courtesan… and holds my daughter more or less constantly in mind" (Olstein n.pag.). In the same interview, she describes "The narrative arc of

[73] Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton explore the formal elements of prose-poetry and note the ways in which Buffam was inspired by Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book*, which was completed in the 11th century and consists of "a series of linked prose poems and fragments that could be identified as zuihitsu" which is described as "a hybrid prose-poem form that collects, in a list-like way, the personal musings and observations of the poet as she brings her attention to her inner and outer landscapes" (92-93), They observe that "Buffam's book is [also] a hybrid work that contains prose poems and ruminates on dreaming, insomnia, and the intimate spaces of night" and that Buffam "refers to Shōnagon as a way of understanding the enduring relevance of *The Pillow Book* and of the writing process, with a focus on women" (Hetherington and Atherton 93).

this book" as one "which spans a single winter in Chicago" and "chronicles, among other subjects, the shock of the first Polar Vortex, the popularization of the term 'Anthropocene,' marital strain, teaching anxiety, writers' block, and the transformation of my toddler into a girl" (n.pag.).

The first mention of Buffam's identity as a mother is combined with the conceit of the pillow, in a prose-poem which opens with her daughter's declaration that she can swim: "I can swim, Her Majesty proclaims from her pillow one morning" (Buffam 9). Her daughter's presence, with her head on her pillow, integrates motherhood with the broader themes of the text. Her moniker, "Her Majesty", functions as a screen that ensures a measure of privacy and wittily reveals her centrality and primacy within the family. Her announcement that she knows how to swim also leads to the revelation of her young, clearly pre-swimming age, as the prose-poem continues with the following context supplied by Buffam's speaker: "By this she means that she can cling to my neck in the shallow end of the university pool while I clap and sing a bouncy song about rain to the tune of 'I'm a Little Teapot' with a flagging chorus of other mothers" (9). Her Majesty is a toddler, and the Mom-and-Baby swim classes the speaker attends with her child place her within a community of mothers, as she describes how "In the locker room, the toddlers shriek and squirm in sagging swim diapers while we womenfolk sigh and hide behind our towels" (9). The resignation of the "womenfolk", along with the phrase itself, connects the speaker to a longer history of motherhood.

Buffam occasionally turns her attention to the more frustrating or stifling aspects of motherhood, such as the opening to one prose-poem where she recounts that "After tracing hearts with the tip of my finger across Her Majesty's back ad nauseam in the dark until losing it at last and storming off to fold socks, I step outside for a smoke under the stars" (14). The

frustration of a seemingly endless bedtime routine with a young child who will not fall asleep is familiar to most parents, and for Buffam's speaker, she eventually finds release in time spent alone, smoking under the stars. But time alone is at a premium for mothers of young children, as evidenced in subsequent prose-poem where Buffam's speaker is busy working, writing and researching the very pillow book we are reading, when her daughter interrupts her: "Her Majesty does not knock. She sits down on the mattress beside me and sighs. I am in the middle of a difficult sentence about a rare Mesopotamian pillow, made of petrified goat hair and straw, recently discovered in the rubble of a village in Iraq" (20). She greets her daughter with warmth, but reveals that it is forced: "I look up from my laptop and force the corners of my mouth into a smile" (20). In forcing her mouth into a smile for her daughter, she conceals her frustration at being interrupted. Her daughter wants her attention, "She wants to know how long until I'll play with her, and if she has to take a nap today" (20). With a considerable amount of humour, Buffam also emphasizes the extent to which children demand their mother's attention and monopolize their waking hours, as she further recounts her daughter's mock-threatening whispers: "I want to fall asleep when you do, she whispers into my face. I want to wake up when you wake up" (20).

Her Majesty embodies this duality of motherhood, an oscillation between frustration and joy, drudgery and beauty. While the speaker has to "stitch [a] fifth pair of mittens to Her Majesty's parka's snotty cuffs" while remarking to her that "You have gone through four pairs since October" (34), and is later awoken by her daughter "climbing beside me into bed, wedging her head next to mine on the pillow and announcing that my nostril breath smells like spaghetti" (42), she is also able to experience the world anew through her daughter's eyes. In another prose-poem, she is awakened by her daughter at dawn, recalling that "Her Majesty stands over me,

grinning excitedly" and muses that "I was mistaken, apparently, when I complained over drinks last night to the visiting professor from California about the dearth of sunlight in our lives" (40). The sunlight is representative of the joy her daughter brings into her life, even as the speaker half-complains, "I must now wrench my head from my pillow and follow Her Majesty downstairs. She leads me to the kitchen in silence and stands at the plate glass window facing east" (40). It turns out that Her Majesty wants to show her mother the sunrise, as "She points to a streak of glowing sky along the low horizon beyond the tracks, and traces with her finger a narrow, golden beam across the floor" (40). The capacity for children to allow their parents to see the world anew, to recapture the wonder of life's small details, is succinctly captured in the tracing of the daughter's finger along the beam of sunlight across the floor.

Buffam also chronicles the typical milestones of life with a small child, as she records in one poem Her Majesty's progress (or lack thereof) with potty training: "No luck with the potty today, I record in my little blue pillow book" (50). Buffam appropriates the genre of the pillow book, typically used to record court intrigues and the daily musings of a courtesan, and makes of its subject the quotidian details of life with Her Majesty: "No interest, either, in wearing the new Hello Kitty underwear I bought last week at Target, though Her Majesty did kiss each pair as we removed them from the shiny plastic packaging" (50). Buffam addresses the confluence of maternal humour and frustration at the many sweet anomalies of children's behaviour. Later in the collection, Buffam recalls a bedtime scene with Her Majesty, where she marvels at the "funniness" of language, also providing a metatextual commentary on the title of the text we are reading: "*Pillow* is a funny word, Her Majesty announces in the rosy glow of her nightlight. So is *Word*" (56). This realization of language's apparently arbitrary sounds rouses her from her sleepiness: "She sits up wide-eyed and smiles. *Word* is a funny word, she repeats. So is *Funny*!"

Buffam's speaker interrupts this spiral of word association by reminding her daughter that it's bedtime: "So is *Goodnight*, I intone from the doorway, and dissolve in the dark" (56).

The mother, too, ensures that she has her own space for her creativity and autonomy. Another prose-poem details the gratitude she feels for her nanny, whose help has allowed her time to work or to simply be alone. She recounts that "The grandmother of a classmate of Her Majesty's stopped me on the street today. She had just come from the park, she said, where Her Majesty was playing with her nanny, and she sincerely hopes I know how lucky I am. I assured her I do" (65). She details the things she has been able to do as a result of having paid childcare: "Precious indeed are the hours I have passed, downstairs in my study or outside on the patio with a smoke, oblivious to first steps, tantrums, playdates, and picnics, stopping up my ears against Her Majesty's cries, secure in the knowledge that wherever she is, and whatever she is doing, Her Majesty is in the loving care of an uncanonized Puerto Rican saint" (65). Her nanny affords her the privilege of time to herself, to work or to just smoke alone in the backyard. However, this privilege—inflected as it also is by race and economic inequality—makes the speaker uncomfortable, something which she does not admit to the grandmother of her child's friend: "But it is not always easy, I did not say to the stranger, to be a saint's patron. When I forget to pay her wages, I did not say, for example, she just smiles and says nothing, causing no small inconvenience for my husband who insists on driving across town to settle up the next day" (65-66). The nanny's inability to remind the speaker that she needs to be paid that day reveals the power imbalance of their relationship, as does the fact that she quietly accepts the speaker's recurrent forgetfulness of pre-arranged commitments and meaningful milestones of her life: "When I forgot her birthday, her daughter's quinceañera, and the final performance of the Nutcracker downtown to which I had promised to take them as a holiday treat, I did not say, she

forgave me with the same patient look in her eyes that always cuts me to the quick" (66). The speaker tries unsuccessfully to assuage the guilt she feels at both her relative social and economic privilege and at the unconscious ways in which she invalidates the nanny's humanity by forgetting about her life beyond her paid position in the family. She expresses this guilt and attempts at atonement through the giving of "spontaneous gifts, many of which, I trust she appreciates, represent a considerable expenditure on my part" (66). However, she does not receive the response or the absolution she requires, as the nanny responds "with such glacial reserve that it is often impossible to tell if she is genuinely pleased. Sometimes she neglects to mention them at all, which I find awkward in the extreme" (66). Seeking acknowledgment or absolution through generosity, the speaker asks, "Did you like the glass teapot? The framed poster of the blue-morpho butterfly? Are you fond of the throw pillows with matching afghan and slippers?" She finally concludes with wry self-recrimination, "Needless to say, one does not like to have to ask" (66).[74]

Her daughter's imaginative play and curiosity also form the heart of another prose-poem that finds the speaker making dinner in the kitchen while Her Majesty plays a modified form of 'dolls' nearby: "Looking up from the empty, plastic squeeze-bottle she has swaddled in a dishtowel, pillowed on a folded sheet of bubble wrap, and tucked into a shoebox in the corner of the kitchen while I cook, Her Majesty breaks off her singing and scowls" (86). Her daughter's ability to transform these everyday objects into a baby, blanket, pillow and crib mirrors the poet's skill in taking the experiences of daily, maternal life and turning them into poems.[75] As

---

[74] While it is a memoir and beyond the scope of this dissertation, Camilla Gibb's *This is Happy* (2015) is a recent Canadian text that also acknowledges the indispensable contribution of paid childcare for mothers and writers. Gibb expresses similar guilty hesitations about the racial and economic inequalities of her relationship with her nanny, but ultimately they become very close, forming a singular family unit.

[75] Buffam conjures a child's world and mindset, capturing at the same time the maternal gaze, making her child a subject for her poetry. She notes Her Majesty's development of spatial awareness and imagination, describing how

the mother cooks, chopping onions and carrots for a chicken soup, the daughter pauses her play and song (which turns out to be the well-known nursery rhyme, "Rockabye Baby") to ask, "Why does the bow break" (86). This evolves into an existential discussion about the nature of death and the life cycle, engaged in with a resolute maternal optimism that seems related to what Ruddick identifies in *Maternal Thinking* as part of "maternal practice" which "requires resilient cheerfulness, a grasping of truth that is caring, and a tolerance of ambiguity and ambivalence" (Ruddick 220). When Her Majesty pursues her line of questioning as to why the bow breaks, "Why does the baby fall… Does the baby *die* when she falls?" (Buffam 86), the mother-speaker replies with a gentle honesty: "It's possible, I venture cheerfully. But most people live until they're very, very old and their bodies wear out and they are ready to transform into something new and beautiful, I explain… Like flowers or rainbows or puppies or stars, I suggest" (86). The suggestion of reincarnation or transubstantiation in death is made using things a child would understand to be pleasant or beautiful, however Her Majesty is not entirely satisfied with this explanation: "But first they have to die, Her Majesty continues, undeterred, and not be what they are" (86). This realization of the inexorable finality of death, and one's own mortality by extension, is a moment of maturation for every child, and one which the mother meets with "resilient cheerfulness" (Ruddick 220): "Nothing ends, I say brightly. Everything keeps changing from one thing into another, over and over throughout all space-time. I smile" (Buffam 86). Her Majesty seems satisfied with this conception of the universe, life and death: "Oh, she says

---

"Slowly a globe assembles itself in Her Majesty's head" and while "It bears little resemblance to the globe in my head… there are points of convergence. She has begun to draw maps—tangled networks of lines called Chicago, My Bedroom, Upstairs, India, Today, and Outside" (70). In another poem, Buffam describes the miscellaneous objects she finds hidden beneath Her Majesty's pillow: "A broken pencil, a whistle, a plastic harmonica, beach glass, ribbon, a Hello Kitty Halloween vampire bat sticker, and most recently the broken heel of the purple plastic high heel princess shoe her grandmother caved in and bought her last summer" (74). These items "figure prominently among the endlessly rotating assortment of talismans I find beneath Her Majesty's pillow" (74). Buffam herself makes use of her daughter's collection of things, transforming the imagination and detritus of childhood into poetry.

thoughtfully, looking down at her faceless squeeze-bottle baby. Like recycling, she says" (86). This cyclical continuity, the use and re-use of objects, is mirrored in her play, turning the squeeze-bottle into a baby, making use of a dishtowel for a blanket, bubble wrap for a mattress and shoe box for a crib, the details of which open the poem. At the end, the mother too is engaging in this kind of recycling in her food preparation, as it is revealed that the vegetables she is chopping and adding to a pot are for a soup, into which she is "stirring in the hot chicken stock I've boiled down from last night's bones" (86). This ability to use and re-use objects and items of every day life in new and inventive ways is very much what Buffam, the artist, is doing in her poetry. Buffam draws attention to the ways in which this recycling is, in fact, a part of life and an organizing principle of the world at large, a perspective that her speaker imparts to her young daughter.[76]

Towards the end of the collection, Buffam includes a prose-poem that revels in maternal love. Unable to sleep one night, Buffam's speaker takes her "iPad and earbuds down the hall through the dark and curl up in the powder blue polka dotted rocker beside Her Majesty's bed" to watch Netflix. After watching "three back-to-back episodes" of *The Good Wife*, the title itself a gesture towards sociocultural expectations of women and wifehood, she looks up "to watch Her Majesty's ribs' soft fall and swell under the sheet, which slips away to reveal a bare foot" (87). Buffam captures the maternal gaze contemplating the sweetness of her sleeping child, as

[76] This contemplation of mortality is not limited to Her Majesty's questions and curiosity. A few poems later, Buffam's speaker finds herself awake in the middle of the night, awash in dark thoughts: "We are already dead, I repeat, as I punch down my pillow. We are dead, I say, as I bunch up the sheets. We are dead, I sigh, as I study the back of my husband's head" (89). She gets up and goes to the kitchen, where the refrain continues unabated, "We are already dead, I say, as I pour another cold bowl of Kashi with milk" (89). Not even the evidence of and experiences with her daughter are able to alleviate this existential awareness of death's inevitability and omnipresence: "Her Majesty's construction paper pinwheel crookedly spins on the front lawn. We are dead, sings the wind. We are dead, sings the wheel. We are dead, I repeat the next day in my head, as we hurtle downhill on a blue plastic sled" (89). Even the playfulness and exhilaration of children is permeated by the speaker's disquiet and awareness of life's finitude.

she notes that "Her face is turned away from me, half-buried in her pillow, the far side smothered in a snarl of dark curls" (87). The "smothering" and "snarl" suggests something predatory, accentuating Her Majesty's vulnerability and the mother's sublimated protectiveness. The child is rendered still more fragile when the mother likens her to a suckling baby: "I hear the soft smack of her infantile lips, suckling at the infinite" (87). Her "suckling at the infinite" captures the universality of the nursing child, connecting Her Majesty and her mother to the source of all life and to that which is most primal and enduring. Accordingly, the speaker-mother climbs into bed with her sleeping child, returning to an embodied experience of the mother-child bond: "I lie down beside her and inhale the sweet funk of her neck. All kamma is resolved and the mind-flower of wisdom blooms in Nibbàna's eternal spring" (87). Inhaling the scent of her daughter's skin, the mother experiences a brief flash of transcendence, as Nibbàna and kamma are the Pali terms for the Buddhist concepts better known as Nirvana and karma ("Nibbàna" n.pag.). Motherhood is thus configured as a means to access the divine, a powerful portal to access life's deeper meanings. The conclusion of the poem draws us back into the everyday world through the harsh interruption of a car alarm, but also with the continuity and hope of approaching spring and a new day: "Somewhere in the gathering dawn beyond the blinds, the first car alarm of March hails the sun" (87).

In a final paratextual gesture towards her motherhood, Buffam's author photo on the last page of the Canadian edition is a portrait drawn by her then five-year-old daughter (Cody n.pag.). As Buffam explains, "As the source of much adulterated dialogue in the book, I felt she deserved the last word" (n.pag.). The maternal gaze is reversed, with the child's pencil sketch of her mother taking the place of the traditional photograph. Buffam surrenders her image as a writer to the interpretative abilities of her young daughter, highlighting the centrality of her

maternal identity, and acknowledging the ways in which it informs and inflects her literary creativity. As a collection, *A Pillow Book* is not principally concerned with motherhood, as it borrows generically from the ancient Japanese literary art of the pillow book and is largely inspired by the work of the childless Sei Shōnagon. However, Buffam interweaves her daughter's existence and her identity as a mother throughout. Sometimes this takes the form of a particular prose-poem devoted to Her Majesty, and other times Her Majesty is mentioned only briefly or tangentially. Throughout, though, Buffam's text affirms the presence of the mother, expressing her anxieties, frustrations and love for her child. Her Majesty is not an obstacle to her mother's poetry, but is a source of inspiration through her humorous and often deeply-felt musings and observations. As Buffam notes in her interview with Alice Roche Cody, her daughter's words and their dialogues are frequently the catalyst for the poems themselves. There is no boundary or binary between Buffam's motherhood and her poetry; instead, Her Majesty is a co-creator and Buffam's maternal role is openly generative of literary expression.

**Conclusion: The Duality of Maternal/Creative Space and the Mother-Artist**

From the early 1970s onward, women writers in Canada began to take up the theme of motherhood and the intersections between maternity and creativity with increasing frequency and vigor. Notwithstanding the many obstacles and difficulties of combining creative aspirations with motherhood (as I explore in Chapter One), women continued to write and mother their children simultaneously. This material co-existence and literary discourse of two traditionally and typically disparate impulses—creativity and procreativity—opened up both a literal and figurative space for the mother-artist. Concurrent with the rise of second-wave feminism, Canadian writers who were also mothers themselves began to create characters that were both

writers/artists and mothers, defying Romantic conceptions and expectations of the idealized, unencumbered artist's life, and subverting the typically masculine *kunstlerroman* genre in order to reflect the complex lives of women who refuse to choose between their art and their children. Dorothy Livesay's pioneering, poetic evocations of creative, maternal space in the 1940s anticipate—by thirty years—the flourishing of maternally-themed literature that was to follow with the arrival of second-wave feminism. Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* in 1974 was the first text to showcase a successful woman writer who was also a mother, a novel which garnered significant public controversy for its explicit engagement with female sexuality and its main character Morag's transgressive (still, for its time) single motherhood. In 1984, Audrey Thomas's *Intertidal Life* features a newly-divorced mother-writer, Alice, and her three daughters at its moral centre. Thomas's protagonist unveils further possibilities for the mother-artist, a woman who is as deeply invested in her children as she is in her literary ambition. Of course, both Laurence and Thomas's texts share similar impossibilities with respect to the viability of their romantic relationships, but they expand the multitudinous possibilities of the mother-artist. In 1987, Thesen explores maternal consciousness as refracted through the materiality of nature, water, objects of everyday life and the immutable substance of the body in "Marine Life, 1970" as part of *The Beginning of the Long Dash*. Atwood's *Cat's Eye* in 1988 features Elaine, with a successful career as a painter and a mother to two children. While Elaine's first marriage ends in divorce, she seems to resist the trend of impossible romantic partnership by remarrying and continuing to cultivate a well-respected career as an artist. In fact, a retrospective exhibition of her work is the central narrative device that brings Elaine back to Toronto to re-encounter her childhood and her youth. Into the twenty-first century, Shields's final novel, *Unless* (2002), is centred on the perspective of Reta, a translator and fiction writer, and mother to three daughters

as well. Reta, like Elaine in Atwood's novel, is one of the few protagonists who is able to maintain a happy marriage alongside her career; however, like Morag, she is preoccupied by her troubled daughter. The recurrence of the trope of the troubled daughter thus becomes an expression and embodiment of the difficulties of mothering while also pursuing a creative vocation. Indigenous writer Jeannette Armstrong published *Whispering in Shadows* in 2004, chronicling the life, art and activism of Penny, who is also a single mother to three children, and who faces conflict with her eldest, Shanna. However, Penny is able to successfully combine motherhood with a career as a painter and an activist, and to find healing and connection for her children via her large extended family among her Okanagan community. Finally, Suzanne Buffam's 2016 poetry collection, *A Pillow Book,* weaves maternal experience together with ruminations on sleep, witty word-play and interposition in a series of short prose-poems that draw on the ancient Japanese genre of the pillow book. These poems, narratives and characters explore the many possibilities of the figure of the mother-artist, extricating her from binaries that trapped her in previous decades (and centuries), refusing to choose between motherhood or creativity, or to admit defeat in the face of attempting to be *both* mother and artist simultaneously. While the texts in Chapter One articulate the perennial conflicts of the mother-artist, the texts considered in this chapter refuse this conflict altogether by opening up realms of possibility for the mother-artist. This material and figurative space mobilizes feminist concepts from the second-wave, which gave women the freedom and permission to pursue their ambitions beyond the realm of the domestic sphere. But rather than choose career over children, these characters (and the writers who created them) did both. Rather than a stark choice, women did it all. Not without difficulty or struggle, but still they accomplished their goals and mothered their children, however imperfectly.

With this newfound conceptual maternal/creative space, women writers went on to explore other dimensions of maternal experience. Throughout the same time period, in fact, from the modernist era into the present, writers also began with increasing frequency to articulate the more visceral and physiological elements of motherhood, from pregnancy and birth, to breastfeeding and the demanding physical care of newborn babies. The discourse surrounding motherhood and creativity thus reveals an evolution from impossibility to possibility, and from possibility to visceral materiality. Even more to the point, while the writers explored in this chapter opened up space in their work and in their lives for the mother-artist to exist and flourish, the texts I will delve into in Chapter Three reveal the extent to which the maternal body begins to take centre stage. More than just taking up conceptual space, Canadian writers begin to focus more on the materiality of the maternal experience and the maternal body in all its reproductive and (pro)creative possibilities.

# Chapter Three

## "blood / children / milk": Feminist Articulations of the Maternal Body

The embodied experiences of motherhood have traditionally been coopted into patriarchal, biological essentialisms that historically functioned to oppress women, limiting their rights and opportunities by defining and binding them inescapably to their reproductive capacities. This same biological discourse has also cultivated problematic correlations between women and Nature, excluding them from subjectivity and personhood in phenomenological philosophies of the twentieth century. In addition, cultural discourses around motherhood have continued to retain their longstanding and intimate relationship with heteronormative hegemony and domesticity. For these reasons, the female body became, and to a certain extent remains, deeply contested within feminist philosophy. On the one hand, many prominent feminist theorists advocate—either explicitly or implicitly—a reactionary rejection of the primacy of the body, emphasizing instead women's intellectual capacity and potentiality, advocating for their full social and political equality. And at the same time, several notable feminists advocate for a renewed valorization of the power and potentiality of the reproductive, female body, but beyond the confines of patriarchal oppression. This re-appropriation of the body within feminism and, most potently, the radical potentiality of female empowerment *through* the body, has arguably become the dominant approach in feminism's third-wave and beyond.

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Canadian women poets from the 1940s through to the present have undertaken a radical reclamation of the maternal body, refusing the patriarchal essentialisms to which these representations have traditionally been subjected. Instead, these writers cultivate a discursive feminist resistance to essentialist motherhood through a strategic re-centering of maternal corporeality. As will become evident through an analysis of

selected poetry by eight different poets, spanning almost seventy years, the "maternal body" is not a singular, universal entity, just as there is no singular experience of maternity, but rather a multiplicity of possibilities and positionalities. Margrit Shildrick argues that "resistant feminism must seek to explore the body anew" (9), and that "what is being (re)claimed" in this type of feminist resistance "is not a homogenous category of women, but rather a multiplicity of fluid positions linked only by the in-common experience of a specific body form" (9).[77] The vastly different lyrical approaches to the maternal body and maternal experience as refracted through the materiality of the body and exhibited in the work of Dorothy Livesay, Daphne Marlatt, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Di Brandt, Su Croll, Susan Holbrook, Yi-Mei Tsiang, and Melanie Dennis Unrau from 1944 to 2013, enact a radical refusal of patriarchal assumptions and silences about motherhood and the maternal body, and posit instead a series of unflinching, bold and unique articulations of the biological, physiological and corporeal experience of mothering from and *through* the mother's body.[78] This poetic focus, then, on the corporeality of the mother as a particular and unique aspect of maternal experience, signifies a revolutionary discourse of feminist emancipation.

It is also noteworthy that all the aforementioned texts that explore this radical embodiment of motherhood in such visceral and materialist terms take the form of poetry. This apparent coincidence of genre across eight authors suggests that poetry is uniquely suited to this radical reimagination of the maternal body in feminist terms. Certainly feminist critics "from the 1960s through the mid-1980s" paid particular attention to "the personal lyric in the Romantic

---

[77] Jan Montefiore likewise affirms the "immense variety of women poets, often divided by major differences of class, race and circumstances" who are all "writing in a multiplicity of discourses; and any account of a woman's tradition has to take account of these differences and separations" (58).

[78] As M. Nourbese Philip writes, "In patriarchal societies (the only societies we have known), the female body always presents a subversive threat" (288). And as Trinh T. Minh-ha notes, "In writing themselves, women have attempted to render noisy and audible all that had been silenced in phallocentric discourse" (259).

tradition," which "was represented most often by confessional first-person poems voicing an individual's exploration of what was identified as 'female experience,' ranging from female sexualities and the cycles of the female body… to the consequences of women's oppression in patriarchy" (Keller and Miller 5). Furthermore, "this feminist criticism stressed the political, communal relevance of representing private experience" (5). Montefiore likewise observes that "[a] woman's tradition and a woman's discourse are still in the process of construction, an effort which is inseparable from feminist commitment in the here and now" (94). Furthermore, Montefiore asserts that "[i]t is partly through the contemplation and practice of women's poetry that the notion has emerged of a specifically female language which would articulate women's bodily experience, including physical love, [and] childbirth" (136). Poetry is thus a privileged mode through which to articulate new feminist consciousnesses, and is uniquely adept at exploring the ineffable and otherwise inarticulable. It is a genre that, historically, has also been deeply interwoven with lyrical expressions of the "I" of personal subjectivity. It is for this reason that, while these corporeal poems may not explicitly be about the role of the mother-artist or meditate on the conflation/conflict of maternity and creativity, they bear consideration in my project as imaginative and lyrical expressions of the maternal experiences of their authors who are themselves both mothers and writers. This autobiographical element is often further corroborated by interviews, personal essays, paratextual details and biographical events of the writers' lives.[79] The corporeal maternal is also an important development in Canadian women's literature and is an integral iteration of the mother-writer, positioned as it is in the liminal

[79] For example, each of the eight authors whose work I explore in this chapter is a biological mother and wrote/ published their poems about the corporeal elements of motherhood (pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, etc.) shortly after the births of their children.

materiality of the body, which simultaneously separates/connects the external, sociocultural manifestations of motherhood from/with the interior consciousness of maternal subjectivity.

**Corporeal Feminisms of the Late-Twentieth Century**

"The status of the body within the dominant Western intellectual tradition has largely been one of absence or dismissal" (Shildrick and Price 1). Moira Gatens more emphatically asserts that "the history of western thought shows a deep hatred and fear of the body" and that "this somatophobia" can be "understood… to be specifically masculine and intimately related to gynophobia and misogyny" (228). Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price attribute Western philosophy's discomfort with the female body to its "potentially dangerous volatility" as emblematized in menstruation, pregnancy, birth and lactation, all of which "marks the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason" (3). These uniquely feminine biological processes reveal the female body as one which "has a propensity to leak, to overflow the proper distinctions between self and other, to contaminate and engulf," which not only renders it an object "of fear and repulsion" but as generative of "deep ontological anxiety" (3). Especially "[i]n contrast to the apparent ordered self-containment of the male body, which may then be safely taken for granted and put out of mind, the female body demands attention and invites regulation" (3). Rebecca Kukla likewise concurs that the "dubious, hard-to-fix, [and] permeable boundaries" of the female body and its propensities—especially in pregnancy and new maternity—to "leak, drip, squirt, expand, contract, crave, divide, sag, dilate, and expel" has "been a source of various species of intellectual and visceral anxiety" (283). Kukla also asserts, like Shildrick and Price, that "[t]he maternal body has long been seen as posing a troubling counterpoint to the mythical well-bounded, fully unified, seamless masculine body" (283).

Feminism's response to this legacy of refusing the body and privileging a disembodied freedom of the mind has been divided. Certain theorists, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone, have tended to perpetuate this general elision of the body, viewing its reproductive encumbrances as an obstacle to personal freedom (Shildrick and Price 4).[80] Notwithstanding this reluctance toward or avoidance of the body by some feminists, Price and Shildrick maintain that "feminism has long seen its own project as intimately connected to the body, and has responded to the masculinist convention by producing a variety of oftimes incompatible theories which attempt to take the body into account" (1). Integral to the discursive underpinnings of second-wave feminist theorizations of the body was the philosophical work of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva.[81] Luce Irigaray is perhaps the most radical and controversial of the three theorists, having faced persistent accusations of biological essentialism in her development of theoretical "connection[s] between women's bodies and women's true selves" (Whitford 3). She argues that "[s]ubjectivity" has been "denied to woman" and that this denial is the foundational element "for every irreducible constitution as an object: of representation, of discourse, of desire" (Irigaray *Speculum* 133). In other words, the denial of subjectivity to women is the cornerstone of women's objectification under patriarchy. However, Irigaray suggests that "if, by exploits of her hand, woman were to reopen paths into (once again) a/one logos that connotes her as castrated, especially as castrated of words… then a certain sense, which still constitutes the sense of history also, will undergo unparalleled interrogation,

---

[80] Elizabeth Grosz also notes that "[f]eminists, like philosophers, have tended to ignore the body or to place it in the position of being somehow subordinate to and dependent for all that is interesting about it on animating intentions, some sort of psychical or social significance" (vii). Shildrick and Price likewise note that "many feminists… have been reluctant to engage with the female body, or have found it difficult to provide a positive theorisation of it" (3).
[81] While some scholars have cautioned against the generalized, blurring together of these three continental philosophers as "the high priestesses of *écriture féminine*" (Whitford 3), it is nonetheless productive to think through the combined implications of their contemporaneous, poststructuralist feminisms of the female body in relation to discourses of maternal corporeality.

revolution" (142). How this "interrogation" and "revolution" might proceed, according to Irigaray, is through language. She exhorts women to refuse the discursive "blanks" and "exclusion[s]" of masculine discourse and resist this erasure through the use of "*divergences*… *ellipses* and *eclipses* that deconstruct the logical grid of the reader-writer" and work to "*[o]verthrow syntax* by suspending its eternally teleological order" (142). Irigaray advocates for a new, uniquely feminine discourse that refuses masculinist logic and accepted syntactical forms. Irigaray explains that the key to the problem of women's oppression lies in "How [to] find a voice… where even her breath is lost" (143).

Beyond the trappings of language, Irigaray also outlines the patriarchal terror of the maternal, and asserts her refusal of the negation and negativity with which the mother has been traditionally associated in psychoanalytical paradigms: "Obviously, you will find opaqueness and resistance in the mother, even the repulsiveness of matter, the horror of blood, the ambivalence of milk…But she—at least—is not nothing. She is not this vacuum (of) woman. This void of representation, this negation of all representation" (228). Rather, Irigaray insists on the indelible presence of the mother and the woman, and on her innate fluidity: "Woman is neither open nor closed. She is indefinite, in-finite, *form is never complete in her.* She is not infinite but neither is she *a* unit(y)" (229). Irigaray roots this feminine incompletion and fluid boundarylessness in the physiology of the female body itself: "Body, breasts, pubis, clitoris, labia, vulva, vagina, neck of the uterus, womb… all these foil any attempt at reducing sexual multiplicity to some proper noun, to some proper meaning, to some concept" (233). She declares that "the sex of woman is not one. And, as jouissance bursts out in each of these/her 'arts,' so all of them can mirror her in dazzling multifaceted difference" (239).

In a lecture from 1981, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother," Irigaray further elaborates her philosophy on the relationship between feminism and motherhood. She notes that "[t]he maternal function underpins the social order and the order of desire" (Irigaray "Bodily" 35-36) and that, furthermore, there is emancipatory possibility in women reclaiming their maternity and its implications beyond biological reproduction. She asserts that "[w]e must give… new life to that mother, to our mother within us and between us. We must refuse to let her desire be annihilated by the law of the father. We must give her the right to pleasure, to *jouissance*, to passion, restore her right to speech" (43). And again, Irigaray asserts that

> [w]e must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language… which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language… attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal. (43)

Michelle Boulous Walker interprets Irigaray's approach as advocating for a new "erotics of reading and writing" which "ushers in a new era of philosophical investigation, new possibilities, and styles that seeks to speak the hitherto silenced realms of woman's sexual being" (81). Ann E. Kaplan likewise observes that Irigaray's philosophy advocates for the discovery of "a different 'language,' other modalities of being, through the *body*" (36).

In 1975 Hélène Cixous, a contemporary of Irigaray, wrote "The Laugh of the Medusa," which has been described as "the most widely quoted feminist text" (Segarra 2).[82] Feminist

---

[82] The essay's importance within feminist theory ignores Cixous's personal disavowal of "the feminist label," because of its "restricted and biased meaning with which she did not identify" (Segarra 3). Nonetheless, Cixous is a major philosophical proponent of sexual difference feminism and reacted strongly against "the deep-rooted prejudices that prevented women from fulfilling themselves" (3-4). Marta Segarra describes Cixous's "The Laugh of

scholars "have often described Cixous's manner—in relation to *écriture féminine*—as 'writing the body,' meaning that she does not rely mainly on rationality but incorporates the body's rhythms, humors [*sic*], and moods" (12). Furthermore, Marta Segarra asserts that "[a] major part of the text's originality consists in how it tightly links the repression of women's bodies to the repression of their writing. It calls on women to break the symbolic and effective silence to which they have been reduced" (20). Cixous opens her landmark essay with this exhortation: "I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do.* Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (Cixous 27). Cixous conflates corporeality and literary production, interpreting the historical exclusion of women from the pantheon of literary creativity as motivated by the same patriarchal oppression that has traditionally alienated women from their own bodies. As such, Cixous argues that the way back to language, to empowerment, is also through the body. She asks, "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (29). Like Irigaray, Cixous highlights the phallocentrism that defines the long history of literary production (31), but she concedes that there have been exceptions and that these have occurred within the realm of poetry (31).[83] Most pertinent to my project in this chapter is Cixous's observation that poetry remains a privileged mode of representation, and that its connections to the unconscious can be mobilized to reclaim women's voices and subjectivity: "But only the poets…. Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the

---

the Medusa" as "a feminist manifesto, a cogent call to all women regardless of culture or situation, to realize their strength and capacity to change the world" (19).

[83] As we will see below, Kristeva also comes to a similar conclusion about the possibilities inherent in avant-garde poetics.

unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women" (31-32).

In order to recapture her own agency and reclaim her body for herself, women must write: "She must write her self… By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display… Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (32).[84] Cixous deliberately blurs the distinctions between the intellectual, creative work of the mind and the lived experience of the body, uniting them into one expressive possibility. The body is freed through the articulation of words, and through words, women will find their way back to reclaim their corporeality for themselves: "To write. An act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being… it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal" (32). Furthermore, writing will free her from the guilt imposed by patriarchy, inherent to everything she does or does not do: "guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being 'too hot;' for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing" (32). For Cixous, the writing woman is an emancipated woman, inscribing herself into history, as writing is "[a]n act that will also be marked by woman's *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history…To write and thus to forge for herself the anti-logos weapon." (32). Integral to this liberation is the maternal, since, as Cixous explains, "a woman is never far from 'mother'… There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (34). The "white ink" of women's writing has been taken up by other

[84] Cixous continues, "Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (32).

scholars, most relevantly and recently in Rishma Dunlop's 2007 anthology *White Ink: Poems on Mothers and Motherhood*. Dunlop traces Cixous's use of the phrase to "the French symbolist poet of the late 1880s, Stéphane Mallarmé" for whom "white ink was the negative transparency of reality, a translation of silence" (3). Dunlop explains that for Cixous, "white ink represents what is invisible—what is born of language, the embodied experience of the mother and child, writing that contains the symbolic force of life, writing that counters oblivion and death. Through the white ink of writing in breast milk, Cixous wanted to convey that writing is a reunion with the maternal body, an unalienated relation to female bodies in general" (3).

During the 1970s in France, Julia Kristeva also began her "more psychoanalytically oriented examination of the problems of femininity and motherhood, either as embodied in Western representations of women or mothers, or as an area posing new theoretical problems for the psychoanalyst" (Moi 7). Toril Moi notes that this time period also coincided with Kristeva's own experiences of motherhood, as she bore her only son in 1976 (7). Moi positions Kristeva as feminist-adjacent, or as she phrases it, as "a somewhat critical fellow-traveler" (9), noting that Kristeva's primary interests were mainly linguistics and semiotics (7).[85] Moi summarizes Kristeva's theoretical approach to language as follows: "Setting out to understand the signifying process… Kristeva transforms Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic order into a distinction between the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*. The interaction between these two terms (which… are processes, not static entities) then constitutes the signifying process" (12). Most central to my feminist concerns is the fact that for Kristeva, "[t]he semiotic is linked to the

[85] Moi also highlights Kristeva's criticism of "liberal or bourgeois feminism for its lack of radicalism" and especially "for French radical feminism or the kind of feminism which emphasizes women's intrinsic difference from men" (10). Notwithstanding Kristeva's avowed resistance to sexual-difference feminism as elucidated by her contemporaries, it is useful to think through the implications of her philosophy in relation to language and the maternal body.

pre-Oedipal primary processes" which are "gathered up in the *chora* (from the Greek word for enclosed space, womb)" (12). While I am disinclined toward psychoanalysis (I agree with Irigaray's critique of its complicity with oppressive, patriarchal conceptions of women and female sexuality), Kristeva's theorization of the *chora* and its disruptive potentiality in language is productive in my consideration of maternal poetry that is centred on the body.

In her 1973 essay, "The System and the Speaking Subject," Kristeva defines semiology as "conceiv[ing] of meaning not as a sign-system but as a *signifying process*" (28). She goes on to argue that semiotics "is itself a metalanguage" and that "[i]ts specificity can be preserved only in the signifying practices… thus poetic language making free with the language code" which "reorder[s] the psychic drives which have not been harnessed by the dominant symbolization systems" (Kristeva "The System" 30). Like Cixous and Irigaray, Kristeva believes in the disruptive power of poetic language, specifically through its origin in and mobilization of forces of the *chora*.[86] While Kristeva's conceptualization of the *chora* references the centrality of the maternal in poetic processes, and particularly the need to access and mobilize pre-linguistic drives related to one's pre-memories of being mothered, she much more explicitly centres her own maternal subjectivity and its corporeal iterations in her famous essay, "Stabat Mater," which was originally published in French in 1977, and translated into English for the first time in 1985. The essay is a meditation "on the cult of the Virgin Mary and its implication for the Catholic

[86] Kristeva more fully elaborates on her understanding of the *chora* in her 1974 essay, "Revolution in Poetic Language," where she describes the *chora* as occupying something of a paradoxical space in language, where it "is itself part of the discourse of representation" (93) but exists also, "as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality. Our discourse—all discourse—moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it" (94). The *chora* is also, significantly, bound up with the maternal. Kristeva acknowledges that this connection originates in Plato's original concept, writing that "Plato himself… calls this receptacle or *chora* nourishing and maternal" (94). Kristeva elaborates this connection even further when she writes that "Drives involve pre-Oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother" (95). Furthermore, "The mother's body is… what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordered principle of the semiotic *chora*" (95). And "the very practice of art necessitates reinvesting the maternal *chora* so that it transgresses the symbolic order" (115).

understanding of motherhood and femininity" (Moi 160), however, the text is also unique in its radical incorporation of Kristeva's own reflections and meditations on motherhood, as it "coincides with her own experience of maternity, recorded and reflected in the personal observations which break up the main body of the text" (160). It is an experimentation with form that seeks to make visible the interruptions and interventions of the chora, bringing to the surface previously sublimated and silent experiences and motivations. Moi notes that "Stabat Mater" argues that "due to the demise of the cult of the Virgin, and of religion in general, we are left without a satisfactory discourse on motherhood" (160). Most significantly for my theoretical grounding in this chapter is Kristeva's emphasis on "the need for a new understanding of the mother's body" and "an urgent need for a post-virginal discourse on maternity, one which ultimately would provide both women and men with a new ethics: a 'herethics'" (161).

In the introduction to "Stabat Mater," Kristeva observes that there has been "[a] negation or rejection of motherhood by some avant-garde feminist groups. Or else an acceptance—conscious or not—of its traditional representations by the great mass of people, women and men" (Kristeva "Stabat" 161). Into this apparent conceptual and discursive void, Kristeva inserts her own maternal subjectivity, rooted firmly in the visceral materiality of the birthing, maternal body.[87] The lyrical symbolism of Kristeva's maternal prose forms a stark contrast with the crisp syntax of her theoretical and historical considerations of the iconography of the Virgin Mary, and its formal placement in columns of bolded text alongside her philosophical engagement with representations of motherhood functions as a disruptive counter-text that privileges a maternal

[87] Kristeva describes the pain of birthing as a "Dream without glow, without sound, dream of brawn. Dark twisting, pain the back, the arms, the thighs—pincers turned into fibres, infernos bursting veins, stones breaking bones: grinders of volumes, expanses, spaces, lines, points. All those words, now, ever visible things to register the roar of a silence that hurts all over" ("Stabat" 167-68).

subjectivity grounded in the corporeal.[88] Kristeva's maternal subjectivity is firmly rooted in the materiality and experientiality of the body, even in terms of her relationship with her newborn son. Their connection is intimate and bodily, an exchange of energy or flows. Kristeva is, in many ways, attempting to capture and express the semiotic and the chora.[89] Furthermore, Kristeva connects her own experiences of mothering to being mothered herself.[90]

Kristeva elaborates and unfolds the ways in which pregnancy disrupts subjectivity, as a pregnant woman is no longer a self-contained, impermeable body-self, but carries within her the body and (potential) subjectivity of another person. This disruption of the boundaries of the self becomes an ontological challenge, and Kristeva meditates on the ways in which this process is rooted in the materiality of the maternal body.[91] She further posits that the unique positionality of women is at the threshold between these two bodily orientations: "We live on that border, crossroads beings, crucified beings…. A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language" (178). Here, Kristeva connects the corporeal with the discursive and linguistic in the same manner as Cixous and Irigaray. Kristeva traces the difficulty with articulating women's subjectivity in language to this division that is inherent within her very body.

---

[88] Two pages later, another column of bolded text appears, centred now on breastfeeding: "Scent of milk, dewed greenery, acid and clear, recall of wind, air, seaweed… I hover with feet firmly planted on the ground in order to carry him, sure, stable, ineradicable, while he dances in my neck, flutters with my hair, seeks a smooth shoulder on the right, on the left, slips on the breast, swingles [sic], silver vivid blossom of my belly, and finally flies away on my navel in his dream carried by my hand. My son" (Kristeva "Stabat" 171).

[89] Kristeva describes "Nights of wakefulness, scattered sleep, sweetness of the child, warm mercury in my arms, cajolery, affection, defenceless body, his or mine, sheltered, protected. A wave swells again, when he goes to sleep, under my skin—tummy, thighs, legs: sleep of the muscles… sleep of the flesh" ("Stabat" 171-172).

[90] She writes, "The wakeful tongue quietly remembers another withdrawal, mine… Recovered childhood, dreamed peace restored, in sparks, flash of cells, instants of laughter, smiles in the blackness of dream, at night, opaque joy that roots me in her bed, my mother's, and projects him, a son, a butterfly soaking up dew from her hand, there, nearby, in the night. Alone: she, I and he" (Kristeva "Stabat" 172).

[91] She delineates the various elements of the body as follows: "On the one hand—the pelvis: centre of gravity, unchanging ground, solid pedestal, heaviness and weight to which the thighs adhere… On the other—the torso, arms, neck, head, face, calves, feet: unbounded liveliness, rhythm and mask" (Kristeva "Stabat" 178).

Despite Kristeva's deep investment in psychoanalytic paradigms, she simultaneously—in the normative prose of the essay that runs alongside the bolded maternal subjectivity—highlights the silences and absences within Freud's conceptualization of the maternal.[92] In response to this discursive and conceptual abyss, Kristeva suggests that the solution lies in listening to and paying heed to women, and the ways in which they narrativize and articulate their maternal experiences: "There might doubtless be a way to approach the dark area that motherhood constitutes for a woman; one needs to listen, more carefully than ever, to what mothers are saying today, through their economic difficulties and, beyond the guilt that a too existentialist feminism handed down, through their discomforts, insomnias, joys, angers, desires, pains and pleasures" (179). In many ways, my dissertation concerns itself with this very project—the ways in which Canadian women writers have articulated their motherhood over the past seventy years, in response to both "a too existentialist feminism" of the early second-wave and the corporeal and difference-feminism that followed. Certainly, Kristeva's essay encodes and embodies her own experiences and interpretations of pregnancy, childbirth and infant-care, and the connections she draws with her philosophical and psychoanalytical training.

Nonetheless, Kristeva struggles to resolve the ontological challenge presented by the maternal body: "The unspoken doubtless weighs first on the maternal body: as no signifier can uplift it without leaving a remainder, for the signifier is always meaning, communication or structure, whereas a woman as mother would be, instead, a strange fold that changes culture into nature, the speaking into biology" (182). She notes that "[a]lthough it concerns every woman's body, the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature) and the child's arrival (which extracts

[92] She remarks that "as far as the complexities and pitfalls of maternal experience are involved… Freud offers only a massive *nothing*" (178-179).

woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility… of reaching out to the other, the ethical)" (182).[93] If we interpret this heterogeneity of the maternal body as generative of the chora, and recall Kristeva's assertion that this chora finds its unique expression in avant-garde poetry, perhaps this can explain the confluence of texts which address maternal corporeality through lyric poetry. In other words, a Kristevan analysis might find that lyric poetry is uniquely suited to explorations of the maternal body because of the proximity of both the text and the corporeal to the *chora*. Poetry's ability to disrupt, challenge and slip through the symbolic (masculine) organization of language can begin to articulate the ineffable maternal body.

In her 1979 essay, "Women's Time," Kristeva affirms women's continued desire to bear children, and also acknowledges women's relatively recent "aspiration towards artistic and, in particular, literary creation" ("Women's" 206-207). In response to her query, "Why literature?" Kristeva presents a series of possibilities: "Is it because, faced with social norms, literature reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth itself about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and unconscious universe?" (207). Ultimately, she concludes that literary aspiration "bears witness to women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex" (207). Women's writing can thus articulate previously silenced discourses, liberating and illuminating not only maternal experience, but all the intimate realities of living as a woman. In "A New Type of

---

[93] Elsewhere, Kristeva describes pregnancy as an experience of "the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech" ("Women's" 31). This is followed by "The arrival of the child" which "leads the mother into the labyrinths of an experience that, without the child, she would only rarely encounter: love for an other" (31). She distinguishes this maternal love from romantic fusion or sexual passion, describing it instead as "the slow, difficult, and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself" (31).

Intellectual" (1977), Kristeva concludes that "far from contradicting creativity (as the existentialist myth would still have us believe), maternity… can favour a certain kind of female creation… in so far as it lifts fixations, and circulates passion between life and death, self and other, culture and nature, singularity and ethics, narcissism and self-denial. Maternity… always succeeds in connecting up heterogeneous sites" (298).

The advent of feminism's third-wave in the 1990s witnessed a resurgence of theoretical considerations of corporeality and its liberatory possibilities. Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), seeks to "refigure… the body so that it moves from the periphery to the center of analysis, so that it can now be understood as the very 'stuff' of subjectivity" (Grosz ix). Grosz argues that "the body, or rather, bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself" (x). Grosz outlines the necessity of developing an "understanding of *embodied subjectivity*, or *psychical corporeality*," one that "refuses reductionism, resists dualism" (22). She suggests that one must regard "the body as the threshold or borderline concept that hovers perilously and undecidably at the pivotal point of binary pairs. The body is neither—while also being both—the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined" (23). Grosz privileges the embodied consciousness, explaining that "Insofar as I live the body, it is a phenomenon experienced by me and thus provides the very horizon and perspectival point which places me in the world and makes relations between me, other objects, and other subjects possible" (86).

With respect to female bodies in particular, Grosz's "hypothesis is that women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage" (203). She argues that women "are represented and live themselves as seepage, liquidity" (203). This results in a literary and cultural discourse that represents women as uncontrollable, generative of an "ambivalence between desperate, fatal attraction and strong revulsion, the deep-seated fear of absorption, the association of femininity with contagion and disorder, the undecidability of the limits of the female body (particularly, but not only… in the case of pregnancy)" (203). Ultimately, Grosz centres the experience of women in the various ebbs and flows of the body:

> The specific, particular developments surrounding women's coming to maturity are… linked with and may be represented in terms of various cycles of bodily flow: women's genitals and breasts as the loci of (potential) flows, red and white, blood and milk, flows that are difficult to appropriate…. Flows that signal both a self-contained autoerotic pleasure and a site of potential social danger insofar as they are resistant to various cultural overlays… (207)

What is noteworthy in Grosz's corporeal feminism is its potential for disruption and volatility (as evidenced also in her title, *Volatile Bodies*). Much of my analysis of the maternal poetry which follows is predicated on this idea of the disruptive potentiality of the maternal body, due in part to its permeability and lack of firm boundaries.

Finally, Margrit Shildrick's 1997 *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries* aligns in many ways with Grosz's analysis of feminism and the body, concurring that "[t]he indeterminacy of body boundaries challenges that most fundamental dichotomy between self and other, unsettling ontological certainty and threatening to undermine the basis on which the known self establishes control" (Shildrick 34). In defense against accusations of biological essentialism, Shildrick

argues that "what is being (re)claimed is not a homogenous category of women, but rather a multiplicity of fluid positions linked only by the in-common experience of a specific body form. And that notion speaks precisely to my second feminist marker: the insistence that discursive deconstruction should not entail dis-embodiment" (9). Like Grosz, Shildrick focuses on the element of liquidity and the body, and the ways in which this transgresses established binary notions of selfhood and subjectivity. She is concerned with "both the especial immanence of the female body, as it is frequently represented in ontological theory, such that it enmeshes women themselves; and its putative leakiness, the outflow of the body which breaches the boundaries of the proper. Those differences—mind/ body, self/ other, inner/ outer—which should remain clear and distinct are threatened by loss of definition, or by dissolution" (16-17). The female body's ability to unsettle, threaten and undermine the status quo is precisely what the poets I study in this chapter are mobilizing; the discursive and poetic exploration of the maternal body is radical and revolutionary because of its ability to overturn patriarchal conceptions of the figure of the mother and the self. My project here, in looking at articulations of the maternal body through lyric poetry, is aligned with Shildrick, who reveals that she "favour[s] a feminist rewriting of the subject that demands an attention to the corporeal body" (167). The poets in this chapter are, likewise, developing a feminist rewriting of the maternal that privileges the body and corporeality. The theoretical work of Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva, Grosz and Shildrick thus form a set of shifting lenses through which the feminist politics at work in the following lyric poetry of the maternal body can be illuminated.

In a Canadian literary context, Marie Carrière notes that "writing in the feminine," a concept that emerged from post-structuralist, Continental feminism, "had a lasting impact on Canadian letters" (3). Carrière argues that "the shared ground… of writings in the feminine

generally… lies in this self-conscious exploration and inscription of a distinctly feminist poetics." (4) Carrière also highlights the prominence of the maternal in the poetry of Nicole Brossard, Di Brandt and Lola Lemire Tostevin (among others)[94], explaining that their concerns with "feminist configurations of the maternal" function "as one possible model of a relational ethics" (5), and that the "maternal model underlies constructions of female subjectivity" (5). Most relevant to my analysis in this chapter, however, is Carrière's assertion that this Canadian poetry "in the feminine" "seek[s] to incorporate a discourse centred on the female body, language, and (inter)subjectivity, within the literary text itself" (4). This convergence of the maternal, the poetic, and discourses of the female body is central to my project in this chapter, as I trace a corporeal lineage through the maternal poetry of Canadian writers from 1944 to 2013, and reveal the potentialities of their emancipatory feminisms.

**The Corporeal Maternity of Dorothy Livesay**

Livesay occupies a unique position in my analysis, in being the only author to appear in three of my four chapters. This is due, in part, to the longevity of her literary career, which spanned an astonishing sixty-plus years, from the publication of her first volume of poetry in 1928 to her last in 1991. It is also a testament to her sustained engagement with the theme of motherhood, beginning with a series of poems from the 1940s, when she had her own children, through the 1970s and early '80s. My focus on Livesay in this chapter is on one of her poems "Serenade for Strings: for Peter," published as part of *Day and Night* (1944), which refracts her maternal experience through the bodily experience of giving birth. What sets this text apart as something of a rarity, even among Livesay's dozen-or-so maternally-themed poems, is twofold:

[94] While I will address the work of Brand and Tostevin in this chapter, my exploration of Brossard's *These Our Mothers* is in "Chapter 4: Maternal Consciousness."

first, in its attention to the corporeal experience of giving birth and second, in the time period in which it was written and published. After all, any discursive or literary engagement with the maternal body remained largely taboo, notwithstanding Mina Loy's poem, "Parturition" in 1914[95] and "the 1938 publication of Enid Bagnold's novel *The Squire*" where "the pregnant and birthing woman's subjectivity [was] made the focus of a [prose] text" (Podnieks and O'Reilly 11). Once again, Livesay is very much at the vanguard of feminist literary production in Canada with this early poem in 1944, which captures the birthing experience from within the mother's own subjectivity.

The poem is separated into five sections indicated by lower-case roman numerals, mirroring the traditional form of the five-act play and conjuring expectations of a grand narrative. The title, too, "Serenade for Strings," replicates the title of an orchestral piece, reinforcing the idea of performativity. The first section opens with a metaphoric knocking upon the door, signalling the beginning of labour: "At nine from behind the door / The tap tapping / Is furtive, insistent: / Recurrent, imperative" (Livesay *CP* 131). The faint pains of early labour nonetheless prompt a declaration of a new subjectivity emerging from within the mother's body: "The I AM crying / Exhorting, compelling" (131). There is, however, a split meaning in the capitalized "I AM," since an alternate and simultaneous reading is the "I" of the mother herself: "I AM crying / Exhorting, compelling" (131). Here, the mother asserts her own presence alongside that of the child, even as the "I AM" of the child cries out within her.[96]

---

[95] Editor Roger Conover describes the poem as "the putative first poem ever written about the physical experience of childbirth from the parturient woman's point of view" (qtd. in Prescott, n.pag.).

[96]As Iris Marion Young notes in her essay, "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," "[t]he birthing process entails the most extreme suspension of the bodily distinction between inner and outer," due in part to the fact that pregnancy itself "challenges the integration of [one's] body experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate" (163). The mother "experiences [her] insides as the space of another, yet [her] own body" (163).

The second stanza advances temporally, from "nine" in the first stanza to "eleven," when two hours later the knocking becomes "louder!" (Livesay *CP* 131). Livesay conjures images of nature and earthquakes to depict the increasing pain: "Wilderness shaking / Boulders uprolling / Mountains creating" (131). However, it is not a destructive upheaval, but rather creative, as boulders roll upwards and mountains are formed. Livesay more fully elaborates the earth-bound metaphors in the third stanza through the imagery of mining: "deep in the cavern" with "the hammer" and "the pickaxe / Desperate to save us" (131) The cavern of the mine is analogous to the cavern of the womb, and the pains of labour to the tools of the miner who, rather than seeking hidden treasure, has the mission of "sav[ing]" the mother and child, once again united in the single word of "us." As the pain intensifies, the poem's speaker heightens the urgency of the diction: "minute by minute / The terrible knocking / God at the threshold!" (131). The contractions are "Knocking down darkness / Battering daylight" (131). Here, the individual maternal body is universalized, and it is not just a single child being born, but God himself, with biblical intonations of banishing darkness in exchange for light.

Section ii of the poem shifts in tone and perspective, indicating its new viewpoint through the use of italics. This single, italicized stanza makes up the entirety of section ii, and privileges a maternal subjectivity, which is awash in lyricism and vivid colours: "*O green field / O sun soaked / On lavish emerald*"*"* (131). The almost hallucinatory quality of the sun-drenched emerald-green field, is then described with paradoxical intimations of pain, with "*Blade and sharp bud piercing*" (131). The "blades" of grass are now aligned with the "sharp bud piercing" its way into life, becoming a kaleidoscopic rendering of the mother's subjective experience of contractions of increasing intensity. Furthermore, she seeks comfort and protection within this vivid, inner landscape: "*O green field / Cover and possess me / Shield me in brightness now*"

(131). The "brightness" within which the speaker longs to be shielded is immediately contrasted in the next stanza (which is also the beginning of section iii) with intimations of darkness and nighttime and the repetitive waves of contractions: "Again… Again… O again. / Midnight. A new day" (132).

The third section opens with biblical intonations, "Good Lord deliver us / Deliver us of the new lord" (132) in the first two lines of the stanza, and twice more in the fifth line: "Deliver us, deliver us" (132). Livesay here plays with the double-entendre of "deliver," with both its scriptural and birth-giving meanings, both of which invoke a desire to be carried to a place of safety, from the pain of labour to the arrival of the baby, "the new lord," who is being born. Once again, Livesay switches back into the mother's subjectivity through the use of italics in the third and final stanza in the section, this time lost in a swirl of pain that obliterates thought: "*No breath to fight it / No thought to bridge it*" (132). The speaker is reduced to a "*Bare body wracked and writhing / Hammered and hollowed / To airless heaving*" (132). Kristeva notes that traditionally, "Silence weighs heavily… on the corporeal and psychological suffering of childbirth" ("Stabat" 183), and yet here, Livesay attempts to narrativize and give voice to this previously unarticulated experience. The difficulty in representing pain discursively is rendered through a paradoxical language of absence, the mother being without breath to combat the pain, and without even thought to create meaning from it in the moment. Consciousness becomes suspended, and all that is left is the "bare body" of the mother, "wracked… writhing… hammered… hollowed" and "airless" (Livesay *CP* 132).

Section iv opens once again with a marking of linear, rational time: "The clock now. Morning / Morning come creeping" (132). The liminal space between pregnancy and motherhood, while the baby is transitioning into its life outside the womb is rendered in the

rising sun and a sense of momentum and speed: "Rising and soaring / On into high gear" on an "Easy speedway / Open country" (133). The image of a car speeding down an open highway speaks to the exhilaration of the mother as both her labour is drawing to a close, and as she is about to see her child for the first time. Finally, as "Heaven trembles," the baby is born with a cry that is "blinding / searing / terrifying" (133). Here, Livesay connects the baby's birth not only to the corporeality of the mother's body, but also to the metaphysical and spiritual, with her recurrent references throughout the poem to "God," the "Lord" and finally, "heaven" as the baby begins its life on earth, apart from the mother. Once again, Livesay employs biblical language to signal the baby's arrival: "The final bolt has fallen. / The firmament is riven" (133). The softness of the alliterative "f" sound is in marked contrast to the violence of a bolt of lightning and the ground being literally split in two, gesturing towards the bodily splitting that takes place in the final moments of a baby's birth, and also the splitting away of the baby from the mother's body. No longer "one," confined within a single body, mother and baby are riven from each other to become separate beings. As Kristeva writes of the arrival of her son in "Stabat Mater," "There is him… his own flesh, which was mine yesterday" (169).

The final stanza also marks section v of the poem, and returns once again to the italicized subjectivity of the new mother, who announces with relief, "*Now it is done*" (Livesay *CP* 133). She is able to "*Relax. Release. / And here, behold your handiwork: / Behold—a man!*" (133). The relaxation and release of the immediate post-partum period is accompanied by the mother encountering her baby for the first time, admiring the "handiwork" she created within the confines of her own body, and also a new subjectivity, as rendered in the "man," that concludes the poem. Rather than presenting the newly born child as the helpless, vulnerable infant it so obviously must be, Livesay highlights the distinct subjectivity and individuality of the new

person who has just taken their first breaths, separating him definitively from the mother's subjectivity.

Structurally and formally, Livesay's poem shifts continuously between the italicized text which represents the interiority and subjectivity of the mother in labour, with often kaleidoscopic and vibrant colours and sensations, and the external, roman text of the exterior world, marked as it is by the passage of time, from nine o'clock, eleven o'clock, midnight, dawn and then noon—spanning a fifteen hour cycle. Once again, Kristeva's theories are useful in decoding this shift, particularly the distinction she makes in her 1979 essay "Woman's Time," which posits a distinction between the masculine and patriarchal sense of time as linear, objective, orderly and imposed, and an alternate, feminine experience of time that is cyclical and circular, and more firmly rooted in the natural. Obviously Livesay's poem pre-dates Kristeva's work by thirty-five years, but Kristeva manages to outline some of the key linguistic and conceptual divides that are at work in this early Canadian literary articulation of the bodily experience of giving birth.[97] As Kristeva writes,

> As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations. On the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is

[97] Kristeva's editor, Toril Moi explains, "According to Kristeva, female subjectivity would seem to be linked both to *cyclical* time (repetition) and to *monumental* time (eternity), at least in so far as both are ways of conceptualizing time from the perspective of motherhood and reproduction. The time of history, however, can be characterized as *linear* time: time as project, teleology, departure, progression and arrival" (Moi 187).

> experienced as extra-subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable *jouissance*. (Kristeva "Women's" 191)[98]

In Livesay's poem, the italicized stanzas, which are characterized by vivid, "vertiginous visions," focus on the natural world, are rooted within the body, and are an evocation of time as monumental and cyclical, whereas the roman stanzas which explicitly gesture toward linear time, suggest the extent to which mothers negotiate between these two conceptual spaces. Livesay evokes the liminality of the birthing mother, hovering between these two temporalities or modes of experience and understanding.

**Daphne Marlatt: *What Matters* and "Rings"**

Like Livesay, Daphne Marlatt has enjoyed a long and prolific literary career in Canada, publishing dozens of poetry and prose-poetry collections spanning more than fifty years.[99] In one of her earliest published poem cycles, *Rings* (1971), Marlatt turns her attention to her experiences of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood, often refracted against the mounting tension in her marriage, which was nearing dissolution. In 1980, she published *What Matters: Writing 1968-70*, which includes the six poems that comprised the original *Rings*, nested among entries from her personal journals and additional poems from the same time period. Combining *Rings,* itself a landmark text, with the personal and literary context provided by the journals and poems included in *What Matters*, reveals Marlatt's emergent maternal subjectivity throughout

---

[98] Young interprets Kristeva's approach to the birthing woman as "renew[ing] connection to the repressed, preconscious, presymbolic aspect of existence. Instead of being a unified ego, the subject of the paternal symbolic order, the pregnant subject straddles the spheres of language and instinct" (166).

[99] Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy note that Marlatt's "publication history demonstrates an exceptionally wide range of interests and an innovative approach to genre" (23) and that her "work is groundbreaking thematically as well as formally. In all her writing she challenges gender constructs, explores outsider experiences, and exposes forms of oppression and exclusion" (24).

her pregnancy, the birth of her son Kit, and her experiences breastfeeding and caring for her newborn. As Di Brandt notes, "[n]arratively speaking, *What Matters* documents the author's experience of giving birth to a son, Kit, and her entry into the subjectivity of motherhood, a rite of passage that coincides in Marlatt's case with the disruption of the traditional romance/ marriage plot and moving into independent, self-defined female identity" (*Wild* 55-56). Most relevant to my analysis in this chapter is Marlatt's attention to the corporeal aspects of birth and mothering. As Stephen Morton observes, alongside Lola Lemire Tostevin (whose work I explore in the proceeding section), "Marlatt… invented a public language in [her] writing for articulating the embodied experience of pregnancy" and "in doing so… Marlatt's poetics not only challenge the exclusion of women's lives from avant-garde poetics… but also contribute to the formation of a feminist counterpublic for articulating the social, political, and physical experience of pregnancy" (152).

The primacy of the body in *Rings* has been acknowledged by a number of critics and confirmed by Marlatt herself. In a 1979 conversation with George Bowering, Marlatt explains the genesis of *Rings* as being rooted in her corporeal experiences of giving birth. She tells Bowering, "what happened was that Kit's birth finally located me in a tangible &[100] therefore absolute way in my own body. I'd been lost from my body until that point" (qtd in Ribkoff n.pag.). Fred Ribkoff highlights the influence of Charles Olson's concept of the "proprioceptive" on Marlatt's work, which he defines as "the adjectival form of the noun proprioceptor, which is a physiological term" that Olson appropriated "into the realm of postmodern poetics" (n.pag.). The

[100] The recurrent use of the ampersand is a notable feature of the poetry of Marlatt, Tostevin, Brandt and Unrau. As "a ligature of the letters of the classical Latin conjunction et" ("ampersand" OED), the use of the symbol "&" with its entangled form on the page could suggest a tighter and more complete sense of connectivity than the more commonly used "and." This mirrors the sense of bodily interconnection and interrelation between mothers and babies that are highlighted in the work of the four poets who make generous use of it.

Oxford English Dictionary defines "proprioceptor" as "a sensory receptor which responds to stimuli arising within the body, esp. from muscle or nerve tissue" ("Proprioceptor" n.pag.), and Ribkoff notes that "[t]he proprioceptive writer is at home in her body, as Marlatt's son is as an infant. The key is to stay in touch (in the sense of physical contact and communication) with the 'stimuli produced within the body' as the body of the poet meets and responds to the outside world" (n.pag.). In a 2009 interview with Heather Milne, Marlatt herself confirms her deliberate use of "Charles Olson's approach to poetics, taking the body as a primary location of scoring the line on the page" (Eichhorn and Milne 244). She further notes that she was interested in "the physiological processes of women's bodies" which she "felt was underdeveloped in writing" (244-245). It was this perceived silence that was part of her inspiration for *Rings,* as she "wrote about giving birth and nursing my child, the physical sensations of constant change, the shifting drift of a sentence" (245). Marlatt wanted to capture the body discursively, as she reveals that "I wanted always to somehow get a rhythmic line that could carry that sense of change, you know, the menstrual cycle, the sense of swelling and releasing in pregnancy and nursing. The rhythms were what interested me" (245). Pamela Banting similarly defines Marlatt's poetic engagement with the body as a form of "translation poetics" ("Body" 2), which takes the form of an "exchange between the texts and the body gendered as female" (7). She describes this as an "intersemiotic translation," which "occurs bidirectionally. That is, not only does the verbal system of the text incorporate the signs of the nonverbal system, the body (menstruation, childbirth, lactation, orgasm, hysteria, etc.), as images or narrative 'material.' The body, organized (incorporated) by language, but always also retaining its 'fleshiness,' never wholly absorbed, mastered, expressed or mimed by language, mothers its own tongue" (Banting "Body" 7).

In *What Matters, Rings* is nested in the middle of the text, bookended by journal entries and other poems which provide both context and a rough timeline of Marlatt's creative process. Together, they form a narrative arc, beginning with Marlatt and her husband, Al, in 1968, before she is pregnant, and concluding two years later with Marlatt and her young son, Kit, and her marriage to Al at an end. In the preface to the collection, written in 1980 and titled, "Of the matter," Marlatt identifies the central preoccupation of *What Matters* as "coming to own up to (take on) my place in a world i was part of & already compromised in. & this in & through those other turbulences of loving & 'losing' love (where did it go?), of first mothering, & of finding a voice to articulate any of it" (Marlatt *What* 7). Of her creative process during this two-year span, she reflects that she "sensed a narrative that wasn't only mine, though i participated in its telling & was thereby told. Caught up in it, connected, in the body of language where we also live" (8). This "body of language," is also—I argue—a language of the body, as the poems that comprise the *Ring* cycle and many of the journal entries and additional poems in *What Matters* are rooted in the materiality of the pregnant, birthing and breastfeeding mother's body.

Marlatt mentions pregnancy for the first time on the twenty-fifth page of *What Matters*, in a journal entry titled "May 28/68" where she quotes a segment of a poem by American poet Lorine Niedecker, which reads,

> Nobody  nothing
> ever gave me
> greater thing
> than time
> unless light
> and silence (25)

which is immediately followed by her own thoughts: "pregnancy would be time made matter in me" (25). This pastiche of an existing poem combined with Marlatt's declaration on the metaphysics of pregnancy also connects with the "matter" of the title—both the material embodiment of time in the body of the potential child, and also time rendered important and meaningful, made *to* matter. In her celebrated 1987 essay, "Musing with Mothertongue," Marlatt expands on the etymology of the word "matter," highlighting its connection "with the body's physicality: matter (the import of what you say) and matter and by extension mother; language and tongue; to utter and outer (give birth again); a part of speech and a part of the body; pregnant with meaning" (Marlatt "Musing" 224).

The first journal entry that mentions the tangible, corporeal effects of Marlatt's pregnancy is dated "December 27/68," where she writes that she is "now 23 weeks pregnant, 5 months" (*What* 45)[101]. She expresses the bodily effects of pregnancy, and the new feelings to which it has given rise within her: "getting awkward. have got to keep doing exercises, keep limber. (feeling oppressed? feeling? should have been keeping track all along.)" (45). She meditates on the oppressive aspects of pregnancy, and the ways in which it binds her to her body and disrupts her sense of herself as an independent woman. She writes that she is experiencing "feelings of being 'put upon,' 'put out' certainly as I grow less able to do the things I've always done: a matter of movement, quickness" (46). As her body changes shape and becomes heavier, slower and more cumbersome, she feels confined and oppressed by its limitations. She also, interestingly, highlights the difficulty she has had in continuing to "both write & teach" through the tiredness of early pregnancy, which has hints of the impossibility of the mother-writer, as I explored in Chapter One. She wonders at this impossibility or difficulty, asking herself, "why

[101] Her pregnancy is first mentioned briefly in an entry dated August 23/68, where she announces to her journal that, "today learned I am pregnant" (Marlatt *What* 27).

couldn't I write? complained of not feeling still centre [sic] in myself any longer, because invaded by strange (alien) growth? felt irritable, weepy, *victimized*" (46). Her feelings of victimization correlate with a sense of powerlessness in the face of her body's procreative capacities, and by the "invasion" of a "strange (alien) growth" which has yet to become her son in any material sense. However, she admits to feeling protective as she begins to feel the baby move within her. She writes, "it's not as if the baby feels like an alien inside me: rather i feel protective toward it (this sense grows) & after 1st movements that I was sure gradually were *it*… a new worry every time I didn't feel it for a day or so" (46).

Later, Marlatt continues to think through the implications of motherhood and her body. She contemplates in visceral, muscular detail, the baby's eventual passage out of the mother's interior darkness into the light of its birth: "infant at the mercy of the uterine muscle which expels it & the hard walls of the birth canal which, threatening to close in, yet pass it through the ring of the cervix, out" (72). This is the first time she uses the image of the "ring," which of course is also the title of her collection focused on her experience of giving birth and early motherhood. She returns, however, to the process of birth giving, observing that "the uterus, the placenta, decide when to thrust it out— & yet, coming forth into the light the child suddenly is, appears to us—an other, recognized as itself, making its own appearance into the world" (72). She reaffirms the connection between the mother's body and the child, and the agency of the maternal body, in its "decision" to give birth to the child. It is only our perception, however, through which the child is suddenly rendered separate and individualized in its supposed desire to be born, when in reality, the baby is merely a passive participant in their birth.

A month later, Marlatt picks up on the final phrase, "into the world," tying it once again to the concept of rings, something on which she is now fixating: "rings within rings (eco-logical

or atomic) (outward & inward)" (72). They become now rings that enclose, as she reflects that "(house is my environment these days) / (as I am a house for her/him?)" (73). The enclosure of her womb is a mirror for the enclosure of her own home and domestic space. She continues, "or more like spheres, as the Japanese ball, inner nut of one forming outer husk of next" (73). And here, she turns to what becomes the title of the text which contains these journal entries and its connection to the concept of rings, meditating on the nature of the word, "matter." She asks, "what matters? / matter (incarnate) in what's the matter?" (73). She concludes that it is the "primary stuff for building (rings) / mater (mother) in matter" (73). The incarnation of matter, as both the organic building of ring-shaped cells, and the essential mater/matter that houses this (pro)creativity, are articulated here. Also, it reveals the extent to which the title of the text, *What Matters*, contains the mother and the child, the mater/matter and the important, beloved baby within.

In another journal entry dated three weeks later, she focuses on her own bodily sensations as her pregnancy progresses and the baby grows heavier in her belly: "I remember beginning to feel the head in vagina, inevitably, quietly—a very sensual feeling" (75). Later that same month, Marlatt continues with the same theme, remarking on the sensations of her body preparing for her impending labour: "so many signs: baby's inactivity during day, energy lately… movement at head of cunt, strange, like period starting but nothing comes. & then contractions every evening starting about 5:00, in response to baby's movements. muscle spasms in buttocks, evenings, difficult to sit still for any length of time" (76).

Immediately following this entry, Marlatt includes the entirety of the 1971 poem cycle *Rings: for Kit*. The marked shift in form and tone from the prose journals to the lyric poems introduces a rich intertextuality, and also brings to mind Kristeva's theorization of poetry's

privileged access to the semiotic and the *chora*, and its consequent ability to access the maternal.[102] The first poem, "Rings, i," centres on the disintegration of the speaker's marital relationship, rendered through recurrent imagery of winter, snow and cold. But at times, this winter landscape metamorphosizes into the interiority of the pregnant speaker's body:

> thicker
>
> i grow, looking more globular & still. Not stone but silent
>
> plummeting snow descent of white. Or who knows what form it
>
> takes in that liquid, fishtailed small frog swimming, shut
>
> eyes blurred by water. soft. touch. (80)

The whiteness of the snow merges into an imagining of the fetus floating within, the maternal body rendered "globular", "still" and "silent", filled with fluid like a child's snow globe, housing an amphibious creature, "fishtailed small frog swimming" (80). The fetus is still strange, and not yet human.[103] With the sensation of the child moving, her field of imaginative vision expands outward to encompass the windows crusted with snow outside: "Kicks, suddenly unaccountable unseen, make their way felt thru / skin anyway a fact beginning" (83). There is a synthesis of opposing forces of hot and cold, a fusion of geological proportions, connecting the fleshly development of a new life to the elemental processes of the earth's formation: "Heat. Pierces

---

[102] According to Kristeva, poetic language is "polyvalent and multidetermined" and moves beyond the boundaries of "codified discourse" (*Desire* 65), past the "surfaces" of understanding and into "*infinity*" (88). Furthermore, "poetic language… posits its own process as an undecidable process between sense and nonsense, between *language* and *rhythm*… between the symbolic and semiotic" (135) and it "maintains itself at the cost of reactivating… repressed instinctual, maternal elements" (136). Poetry is intimately related "to the first structurations (constitution of the body as self) and identifications (with the mother)" of pre-linguistic infancy (137). Elsewhere, Kristeva has described poetry as "a return to the near side of syntactic articulation, a pleasure of merging with a rediscovered, hypostatized maternal body" (174). It is perhaps for these reasons that Marlatt's poetic evocations and translations of her perinatal experiences are so radically different in tone and substance from her more analytical and detached journal entries.

[103] Contemplating the pot of oatmeal she has made for breakfast, the speaker begins to think further about her child: "Pot still / pool bits of oatmeal float in. floats in body temperature / within, soft skin, covered with a down to which some wax / adheres, lardlike, secretion" (83). Again, the attention to "wax," "lard" and "secretion[s]" emphasizes the unhuman elements of the growing fetus, even as she feels the child kick within her.

glass (cold) / irradiating skin, water, wood. & snow crust isolate in crystal / flake like mica or micro-point all joined uncountable thousands" (83). This primal, foundational process also takes place within the mother's body: "one-cell, each a room, internal, order in time runs / on, in / me" (83). The speaker is thus "pierced, clouds uncountably moving body works, his light / foot within" (83). Here, Marlatt makes reference once again to the extent to which "time" is embodied within her, as her pregnancy progresses and her child develops. The maternal body has become a narrative arc unto itself, encompassing also the complexity of life. This connection between eternal or elemental time and the cycles of reproductive development also gestures towards Kristeva's theorization of "Woman's Time" as that which captures these simultaneous concepts of maternal temporality.

In "Rings, ii," the speaker focuses once again on the growing weight of her pregnancy, "Rocking. Eases its bulk, hardly separate tho i / envelop. cave i make, my flesh weight his movement thru, water / kicks, independent of, the room? my thought? all ringed in" (85). The maternal body is presented as enveloping, liquid and cave-like, but one that is also a part of a larger environment, within the room, within her thoughts, which also "rings" them in. She feels the baby move within her, "It's only his foot caught under my ribcage & kicking. Can / feel the ridge of muscle outlined there. Got to move up. / Beginning to get that feeling my whole flesh has slipt down" (88). The weight of her flesh has become burdensome, as she contemplates the personal and social implications of her pregnancy: "Mother rocking. complacent. or placid, deeply satisfied somewhere / inside. but not enough / Is that it?" (88). She concludes that it must be "Not wanting to be / where i am: woman, to follow her, my own mother" (88). Her pregnancy roots her firmly in her femininity and her biological gender, and she is unsure how she is to accept this matrilineage. She confesses to being "deeply satisfied somewhere / inside" but then

casts this sense of satisfaction into suspicion, asking "Is that it?" while expressing a deeply felt matrophobia.

"Rings, iii" shifts in both setting and tone, set almost entirely in the bath, which Marlatt correlates with other bodies of water, both interior and exterior. She begins, "And the bath is a river, in the quiet, i bring only candle / light" (92). Even the wind and trees are represented through water and flow: "Outside a fresh wind is frothing the apple tree, / its own river streaming, round the house, / like a dream" (92). Later in the water, the speaker reflects that "In the bath a sea my belly floats in, i float / relieved of his weight—he floats within" (93). This liquidity is also metaphorically connected to the child's patrilineage, as "the genetic / stream winds backward in him, unknown, son of a father once / fathered" (93). It is a transformative immersion in water, as the mother nears the time of giving birth, and communes with her child: "Tell him, in the bath in the quiet (wind & the bell / clanging outside) only this restless streaming night, fresh / wind off the sea, is where he is" (93). The bath water, the "streaming" night and the sea-wind are all attenuated to the flowing and viscous properties of liquid. As the bath cools, it begins to near its end, the same way her pregnancy is also drawing to a close, all of which is mirrored "in the river-sea outside the winds / around our time, this city, his father's father … / 'delivered'" (93). This delivery "is a coming into THIS stream. You start at the beginning / & it keeps on beginning" (93). Once again, she gestures to the ways in which the child's birth signals an entering into the stream of life, another flowing forward of time and nature and lineage.

"Rings, iv" heralds the beginning of childbirth, and chronicles the mother's corporeal sensations as well as her subjectivity throughout labour. Di Brandt notes that the depiction of childbirth in *What Matters* (alongside that of Laurence's *The Diviners*), "are perhaps as graphic and specific portraits in this regard as we have in contemporary Canadian fiction. Surely it is

appropriate that the inescapably physical, intensely challenging experience of childbirth is the site at which the maternal body, as thinking, feeling, speaking subject, re-enters our imaginative consciousness in new and powerful ways" (*Wild* 163). Marlatt's poet-mother in childbirth tries to "relax" and "breathe" between the contractions, even as she has to continuously run to the bathroom as a result of an enema that she herself had requested (*What* 94). When she returns to the bed, the contractions continue, and she tries to "ride over" them, "breathe higher" and "relax everything" (96). She struggles to find a comfortable position in which to endure them and somehow overcome her pain: "What did the book say for back labour? Try it on your side, … It's / not pain, it crushes me, it grinds me into thick, hot, water. / it wears me down fighting it. If i could only, let go" (96). The difficulty Marlatt's speaker experiences in trying to transcend pain is expressed in the contradictory assertions that "It's / not pain" but something that "crushes" her and "grinds [her] into thick, hot, water" (96). She tries to assert that it is not pain when, in fact, it is a pain so complete as to be obliterating. Finally, after the nurses administer Demerol, she finds herself embracing the experience: "I've settled into it. Tired & floaty warm" (96). It's noteworthy that here she is returning to water imagery, the "thick, hot, water" of pain and then suspended "floaty warm" with the pain relief, both images connecting with the warm bath of "Rings, iii" in the preceding section. She has mastered the contractions: "Coming, & it doesn't matter, i can ride it" through her ability to "breathe higher," even as the pain "grinds / my belly, back, to liquid, panting's a familiar place / at work, it's going, it does work, the breathing does" (97). She marvels at how at peace she finds herself, "just climb higher, panting, feel it clench / deep, still the ends of me relax. panic's gone. Why didn't i / take demerol before?" (97). She accepts and even enjoys the experience now, observing that "Even / the blood trickling down is comfortable. it's me. it's / happening as if I KNEW how it would be" (97). There is a

connectedness to her own body, its fluidity, and her own self-knowledge as a form of empowerment, that things suddenly feel as if they are unfolding as they should.

When she enters the final stage of labour, Marlatt's speaker begins to push at the urging of the doctors and nurses around her: "It's coming. Push. Again, push. Was i really / pushing? It didn't seem to be pushing from inside" (99). There is motion and activity amongst the medical staff, so that it is difficult for the birthing woman to concentrate: "There's so much / going on i can't follow. so much talk" (99). Nonetheless, the contractions continue unabated: "It's coming again, / now push. Now someone's saying push. hard. that's still not / hard enough. Going to have hemorrhoids tomorrow" (99). Stephen Morton notes that in this section of the poem, "[t]he woman's apparent lack of control over her breath and body cannot be circumscribed within the disciplinary structures underwriting post-Cartesian paradigms of subjectivity, or the doctor's syntactically coherent instructions" (166). Instead, "Marlatt's erratic breath lines publicly articulate and value the experiences of her reproductive body" (Morton 167). After an epidural has been administered, she notes that "I can't feel the contraction" and so "the nurse has her hand at the top of my belly, she has to / tell me, now PUSH" (Marlatt *What* 100). Finally, her labour is almost over: "When i look in the mirror it's much wider, / there IS hair. His hair! all matted against my red flesh. / Now lie back. & i feel the forceps go in, barely" (110). Her baby is born with a paradoxical softness that belies the pain that preceded it: "Now gently, now hardly push at all. / & i feel something like a loss, like the end of a sigh" (110). Her son leaves her body, leaving her with a sense of emptiness, a sigh's end, but then she hears him cry for the first time: "A cry! a squall of absolute protest, pain? He's real. & / i haven't seen him!" (110). She had a premonition of the gender, which is confirmed when "someone says a boy (i knew) with / black hair" (110). She is finally able to take a look at her newborn son, as "They lay the cord on my

stomach & he's upside / down, streaked with blood, & reddish, his small round buttocks / & head all wet, matted, all that hair" (101). The body of the child is separate, but laid upon the body of the mother, so they are now separate and yet still close. Marlatt makes a direct connection between the "Rings" of the title and the "ring" of flesh through which the baby has passed, into life, and into his mother's arms, noting that "he's come thru that ring of flesh, into our light, / he's BORN, tight fisted in my arms" (101).

"Rings, v." chronicles the early months of motherhood, with a lyric focus on the natural world and the bodily needs of the child. The poem opens with mother and child spending an afternoon outside, a setting that is suffused with warm sunlight, smells of grass and full with active cats and birds. Marlatt continues to emphasize the theme of circularity and rings, as she positions herself to shield her child from the sun: "turning with him / in my arms to keep his face dark / turning, wheeling with him in / my arms" (102). The mother and child find themselves under a canopy of leaves, the light "blue under, shell light over the radii of trees" (102). The radii of trees form another circle of shade which shelters them. The mother brings her child inside and settles "into the rocking chair's / familiar fabric against my back" and positions herself to breastfeed, "elbow up to support your / head, & nipple lifted towards. You're drinking now, those / hungry sucking movement of mouth, palate like little fish" (103). Marlatt subtly emphasizes the materiality of the mother's body as it rubs against the "familiar fabric" of the chair, and focuses her attention on the suckling infant, connecting it to the fetus it once with the recurrent marine imagery of the "little fish" (103). As the baby nurses, Marlatt's mother-speaker is able to relax, "snuggling down myself into the chairback can relax now" acknowledging that the repetitive stillness of the day is "something out of the course of time marked off by clocks. / Wind blows, plants breathe out their odours drawn by sun, / drifts, gradually over the house"

(103-104). This conception of time has strong correlations with Kristeva's theory of "Women's Time," as I summarized earlier, as a uniquely female and maternal "monumental time," as contrasted against "the time of linear history, or *cursive time* (as Nietzsche called it)" (Kristeva "Women's Time" 190).[104]

The poem nests these vivid images of the natural world and the interiority of the mother's consciousness within the temporality and materiality of breastfeeding (a technique that Susan Holbrook also uses in her 2009 poem "Nursery," which I explore later in the chapter). Marlatt transitions back to the maternal body with the single, italicized line, "*Let the spinning wheel spin,*" gesturing as it does to concentricity, circularity and the play of children, focusing once again on the embodied sensations of nursing: "& the pressure / built up til it hurts in the other breast, is full, towel / tucked under wet" (Marlatt *What* 105). For the child, there is "No need to suck, / it's there, drip from the nipple" (105). The focus on the tactile sensations of breastfeeding, both for the nursing child and the lactating mother, is revealed to be an act of communion and connection. Marlatt writes: "Connect. Open conduit, light or liquid flowing / thru. you. in the circle my arms make around you drinking / sun, my own, skin, hair absorbed, what you now take in" (105). The transmission of nourishment and "light", from mother to child, takes place within the "circle" of the mother's embrace, another gesture towards the enclosing circularity that Marlatt returns to continuously in the poem cycle. This time the "ring" is one of care, sustenance and security. The mother's body is bio-organically transformed, producing milk for her child,

[104] As I observe in footnote 93, Kristeva identifies motherhood has a labyrinthine experience wherein women encounter—for the first time—"love for an other" ("Women's" 206), arguing further that this is uniquely expressed in literature, which "reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth itself about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and unconscious universe" (207). Kristeva also connects this form of discursive, artistic expression with the body, in that it reveals "women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body…" (207).

another way in which the maternal body is rendered powerful and life-giving. Of her breastmilk, the speaker observes, "Tho it seemed so thin-looking when it first / came, in a milky water. all the nutrients are there. & / still it runs. more as you want more, grow more" (105). The mother remains "Amazed, / at the interconnection still. Those first days how, with / every suck, i could feel the walls of uterus contract" (105). She recognizes the autonomy of the new child, addressing him directly: "You, / isolate now, & born, healing my body for me" (105). Marlatt reveals the extent to which the physiological and symbiotic interconnection between the mother and child persists long after the initial bodily separation of birth, and that the body and corporeality are foundational to this relationship. The powerful role of the maternal body in the act of nurturance and connectivity is highlighted throughout *Rings*.

"Rings iv" concludes with a return to what Kristeva would term the cyclical and monumental time of the mother and child, engaging once again with the image of "the wheel" and Marlatt's speaker noting that her "arms make around you spinning as the world does, we wheel thru / light & dark. One day's going (birds & wind, leaves tightening / as our warmth does) into night" (106). The encircling of the mother's arms is mirrored in the spinning of mother and child, and then even further outward in the rotation of the earth, the passages from day to night, marked not by clocks and teleological time, but by "birds & wind." The speaker addresses her son directly, "What can i tell you, / little one, that you don't already know? Nestled there / half asleep, yet sucking, dreamy, open to milk" (106). Her attention to her son's corporeal needs is still captured in the encircling of her protective embrace, while her son continues to nurse and draw sustenance from her body, outside in the sunshine together once again: "Self contained there in my arms that weight the burden of you. / Your small face. Knowing, Unknowing, i will bend over, / shade you plantlike as the sun turns" (107).

Following the poems that comprise "Rings," *What Matters* returns once again to the prose of Marlatt's journals, picking up roughly a week later. She confirms some of the biographical details of "Rings," while also refuting or correcting others. In this sense, nesting "Rings" in and amongst her journals of the period of time which inspired her poetry creates an intertextual relationship, where one is able to refract the poems through Marlatt's narration of her own lived experience, and vice-versa. In the journals, Marlatt chronicles the often complicated and intense feelings of the postpartum period, heightened by the raw physical wounds of labour, all of which give rise to frequent tears: "I felt reborn with [Kit], that clear, pure feeling, childlike, & in my emotions I was… tears always close to the surface, either from terrible feeling of aloneness & responsibility, or simply because my stitches hurt so much—to crying from pure joy, especially at nursing times, just holding him, his head with all its dark hair against my skin. a feeling of wonder" (115). Central to these affective responses is her bodily experiences of motherhood. She remembers "lying in bed feeding him, naked from the waist up, Kit sucked at one breast while milk trickled from the other down my body. never felt so plentiful, never been so delighted with my body, that it was more than adequate. me, the skinny teenager who never seemed to become quite a woman" (116). Motherhood affirms Marlatt's femininity, and she finds empowerment, joy and personal affirmation in the physiological processes of nursing her son.

The journal entries that follow focus primarily on the dissolution of Marlatt's marriage, her unhappiness at their move to Wisconsin, and her search for her own creative voice. However, as in "Rings," she mediates on the terms "matter" and "rings" again, disassembling and reassembling their meanings and iterations: "to be born: to MATTER" (127)."Matter" has more connotations than simple importance or relevance—she is thinking also of the materiality of

matter, and its relationship to space and speech: "made matter: the issue: what matters: issuing thru the ring of the invisible to ground—or hearing: as the vowel carries breath to make a sound" (127). The same way that breath is transformed into sound through the ring of the throat, so too are we born into matter and materiality. She reiterates the singular image of the ring, "sounding, thru the ring of surrounding phonemes, it changes—hearing change the very matter of" (127). In our perception of words spoken, they are transformed into something else. This is also a key to *What Matters*, where the experiential and material is transmitted and transmuted through language, and another kind of birth takes place, as the "matter" of life and maternal experience takes the new form of lyric and prose-poetry.

The final section of *What Matters* is "Columbus Poems," some of which address themes of motherhood and maternal experience. Among them is "at ease," which captures the act of breastfeeding, where the child is "at ease / & satiate," and "smile[s] up" at the mother (132). The speaker wonders "at / what cue what / response?" (132). The speaker realizes the child is reacting to her own bodily relaxation and movement, now that her child is fed: "my slackening of arms' / tense" which is a result of having satisfied her child's need, "now / necessity's gone" (132). The act of holding her child in her arms, that encircling of flesh through the maternal embrace, is part of the similar motif that runs through "rings" and many of Marlatt's journal entries.

Finally, Marlatt reveals that part of what motivates her literary creativity is "to understand the interrelating of bodies / words" (153). She connects it to "KWAKIUTL," an Indigenous tribe from the Vancouver area, who "live by the world = according as the world gives" (153), which she then connects to an "ecology of language: each word what those around it relate of it as it relates (to) them / 'context' / (the text, the weave, the net)" (153). The

interrelation of the materiality of the world and words, language and poetry, is a preoccupation that pervades *What Matters*. The collection captures the corporeal and experiential elements of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood, transforming them into lyric and discursive explorations of maternal corporeality. As Marlatt writes in one of *What Matters'* final poems, "Constellation," the maternal body is the foundational source of connection and community, human beings' first home in the vastness of the universe: "milk & the starry / nipple nebulae we / all desire / *connect* / us in our rights, to / this once & only home / we go on burning" (167). And as Brandt argues, Marlatt emphasizes "the maternal as a model for female subjectivity, and as an alternative to the name and law of the father as the operative function of language" thereby revising "not only male-centred models of subjectivity and representation, but also much of contemporary feminist theory" (*Wild* 46-47).

**Writing (from) Maternal Interiority: Lola Lemire Tostevin's *Gyno-Text***

Lola Lemire Tostevin is "a Franco-Ontarian who writes in both English and French" (Moyes 75), and whose 1983 collection, *Gyno-Text*, explores the interiority of the pregnant, maternal body through a series of imagistic poems. There are thirty-seven poems in total, "mirror[ing] a 37-week pregnancy" (Morton 153), which "depict the symbiosis of the woman and foetus who comprise the maternal body" (Drodge 168). With microscopic and visceral intensity, the short poems of the collection bring the reader into the uterine space of the mother, demythologizing the processes of gestation by discursively focusing on the materiality of pregnancy from within. As Susan Drodge argues in her 1996 doctoral dissertation on Tostevin, Marlatt, and Phyllis Webb, "in their recurrent conflation of text and female body, the lyrics of *Gyno-Text* offer more than a demystification of the Western symbolic construct of maternality:

they develop a discourse of maternal energy that unsettles conventional strategies of representation… and births spaces for female textual being" (169). Indeed, in the Afterword to the collection, Tostevin explains, "These small poems are not about the mystification or sacred calling of motherhood defined as duty… but as source of generative creative power and strength. Not about generation as chronology but as signifying space, both corporeal and mental. Writing which differs in space and defers time" (Tostevin *Gyno* n.pag.[105]). Tostevin thus makes explicit the connections between corporeality and textuality, and the ways in which writing through the body is disruptive and resistant to hegemonic, patriarchal conceptions of time and space, circumventing and refusing dominant discourses. Janice Williamson notes that "Tostevin's language continues to open wide a semantic wound in the dominant linguistic patterns in selected short-line poems… collected in *Gyno-Text*. In this 'female-body-writing,' the double standard of French and English, of mothertongue and speaking Anglo-'white,' of 'menspeak' and 'femspeak,' is crossed and double-crossed" (100). Susan Billingham similarly argues that Tostevin's polyglossia functions "to deconstruct phallocentric and ethnocentric versions of subjectivity by paying careful attention to the fluid duplicities of language(s)" (113).[106]

And as Drodge notes of the poems that comprise *Gyno-Text*, they "recurrently represent the generative power of the maternal body and develop a discourse of maternality that displaces

---

[105] The original 1983 publication of *Gyno-Text* is not paginated.

[106] Furthermore, almost all the critics who address Tostevin's work note the significance of the bilingual nature of her poems, which often slip between French and English, and are characterized by word play and double entendres. Simona Bertacco notes that Tostevin's writing "tries to respond to the multiplicity of the real, of the subject, to the tentativeness of meaning continuously deferred," characterized as it is by the predominance of "word-games, puns, denials and retrievals of meaning" which comprise "the theoretical, political and formal challenges and provocations contained in these texts" (248). Billingham suggests that "Tostevin uses wordplay—particularly the etymological breakdown of words, puns, and sound devices—to diffuse originary meaning and proliferate meanings" (113). Lianne Moyes likewise draws attention to Tostevin's use of "[b]ilingual writing, cross-language punning, neologisms, idiosyncratic language use, a-signifying practices, and other effects of translation" (75). Janice Williamson connects these discursive disruptions to a feminist aesthetic, one which "reverses the hierarchy of discourses, listening to the particular language of Quebec and using the relations of power between the anglophone and francophone Canadas as an analogy for woman's relation to language" (100).

the limits of conventional representational strategies and opens space for a feminine economy of writing" (7). Marie Carrière argues that "Tostevin's… inscription of the maternal body, always already mediated as a space of signification, collapses the duality between the social and the biological. It is at the threshold of nature and culture that the maternal body inscribes itself in the long poem [*Gyno-Text*], the site of which is the uterine space of the pregnant, speaking body and its gestating other" (123).

*Gyno-Text* opens with a ten-line poem, "a / different / tongue / to / pen / a / trait / *le* / *trait* / *d'union*" (Tostevin *Gyno* n.pag). The different "tongues" of English and French are highlighted here in the opening lyric, with the tongue being used to simultaneously "pen a trait" in terms of articulating or writing about a particular characteristic, and also in terms of "penetrating" into an entity or body. She picks up on the doubled-meaning of "trait" with the final three lines, "*le trait d'union*" which translates into "hyphen" in English. Stephen Morton notes that by "[b]reaking down the morphic elements of the infinitive 'to penetrate,' a verb that connotes the male-centered representation of heterosexual intercourse, the speaker rearticulates the inscription of an alternative body" (154). Furthermore, he parallels "the connective potential" of the hyphen/"*le trait d'union*" to the hyphenated title of the collection, which "suggests a relinking of the speaker's embodied experience to the text" (154). Finally, beyond the connectivity inherent to the hyphen, Morton suggests that "the formal practices of 'Gyno-Text' reassemble the specificity of a pregnant woman's corporeal knowledge through a process of translation" (154). This translation from the corporeal to the discursive is also uniquely feminine, and so the "different / tongue" that penetrates is also figured as uniquely female. And in the poem that follows, this gendered specificity is further magnified: "hymen / hyphens / gender / two / constrictions / made / one" (Tostevin *Gyno* n.pag). The homophony and slant-rhyme of "hymen" and "hyphen"

highlight the interiority of the vaginal space as a point of connectivity between the two genders, where "two" are "made / one" through the act of intercourse, as alluded to in the "pen a trait"-ion of the previous poem. The poem that follows elaborates on the act of procreation, "where / orifice / fills / function" and "pulsation / gives / & / takes" (n.pag). Tostevin thus begins her gyno-textual meditation on the pregnant, maternal body with the act of conception. According to Morton, this second poem "emphasizes how the hymen rejoins or enfolds the 'constructions' of gender into 'one'" which "does not simply return to an undifferentiated body prior to language… but rather traces the genealogy of an alternative bodily experience which has been hitherto exiled from representation" (154). It is my assertion that this "alternative bodily experience" that has been "exiled from representation" is that of the interiority of the maternal body, site of both pleasure and conception, and blurring the boundaries between corporeality and textuality. As Morton argues, "Tostevin emphasizes a different exchange of linguistic energy between the body and the text" (154), and that while "Tostevin's text is not a direct representation of a pregnant female body" it is "an intralinguistic transformation of that body in the text" (155).

Tostevin highlights the centrality of the body to subjectivity and identity in the poem that follows: "V / notch / of I / dentity / a / legend / at / leg's / end" (Tostevin *Gyno* n.pag). The "V" conjures the triangular shape and form of the female pubis and its importance to the "I" of "I/dentity," affirming an embodied conception of selfhood, as well as the ways in which women's sexuality has been mythologized and reified as captured in the "legend" between her legs.[107] And while Drodge notes Tostevin's "rather problematic analogy between the female

[107] According to Morton, "Reiterating the inscription or notching of the gendered body in the constitution of the linguistic subject 'I,' the letter 'V' denotes the indentations language makes on the female body as it transforms the body's parts into a metonymic site of sexual difference. Against this ossification of the gendered body as an essential identity or 'legend,' Tostevin disassembles the morphemic elements of the signifier 'legend' in order to materialize and recode the 'leg's end' from a feminist standpoint" (155).

body and female subjectivity as the speaking positions of various poems of the series," she asserts that this "essentialism is strategically employed to disrupt the phallocentrism of Western philosophy" (176).

The poems that follow microscopically chronicle the moment of conception, as "through / the / cervix / the / helix / leaks / a / dream" (Tostevin *Gyno* n.pag), an illusion to DNA and the genetic composition of ejaculate entering the cervix. The next poem follows the trajectory of the "foreign / marrow," born "Out of O" and traveling "into / the / narrow / bare" space of the interiority of the woman's body (n.pag). Morton notes that while "the phonemic repetition of 'O' in this poem parallels the passage of the body being born through the birth canal, it does not do so in a linear or teleological direction" (156). I would go one step further, however, and argue that rather than an allusion to birth, it is a deliberate reversal of this typical narrative, as the poem takes us through the cervix and into the interiority of the mother. The "O" is an allusion to orgasm and the moment of conception, rooting the reader firmly within the confines of the maternal body, as the first cells of the zygote are formed, as the "nucleus / cleaves / until / all / that's / left / is / cleft" (Tostevin *Gyno* n.pag). The sperm and egg meet through soft phonetic sounds of "s" and "f" in the following poem, "sound / of / soft / solder / flash / of / flesh / weld" (n.pag). In the poem that follows, Tostevin makes explicit the connection between the corporeal and the textual, as she writes, "pregnant / pause / as / conceptual / space / interval / between / inner / outer / folds" (n.pag). Tostevin's laser-sharp focus on the interiority of the maternal body opens a new, imaginative space where the relationship between corporeality and subjectivity can be renegotiated, and the woman's body becomes a source of generative, creative empowerment. The poem that follows in French further reinforces the possibilities of the body as a means to disrupt and restructure meaning: "*sens / et / sang / prennent / corps*" (n.pag). As "meaning and

blood come to life" (my translation), Tostevin's use of French here also creates a linguistic disruption, paralleling the feminist disruption of focusing on the interiority of the maternal body. Of Tostevin's use of bilingual poetry, Simona Bertacco argues that she is "[c]aught between two codes" where "linguistic reterritorialization is impossible… and, as a consequence, language starts turning around itself," which is integral to her "clear subversion of *phallogocentrism"* (237). A literal translation of the French words in this passage also re-emphasizes the centrality of the body—as meaning "takes" on a "body." The poem concludes with another unification of text and body: "*prêtent / l'oreille* / *au* / *texte* / *qui* / *s'organise*" (Tostevin *Gyno* n.pag) or "press the ear to the organizing text." I argue that the organizing principle at work in *Gyno-Text* is the maternal body, as the setting, imagery and action of the poems all take place within the confines of a reproductive, female body, from conception, through pregnancy and finally, by the end of the collection, birth. There is no space beyond the maternal in Tostevin's text—it is the container wherein new meanings are cultivated and elucidated. As Drodge also notes, "*Gyno-Text* suggests that the maternal body is a valid source and authority of textuality" (177) and that "[i]n positing the generative maternal body as the source of its textuality, *Gyno-Text* challenges Western social law based on Christian epistemology and its doctrine of the Logos" (190).

The poems that follow trace the development of the embryo, with lines which pick up again on the sibilant phonetics of "s" and "f", such as "fluttering / flinch / inch / by / inch" and "shape / in / soluble / space / so / splendidly / suspended" (Tostevin *Gyno* n.pag). The "yolk / spins / spine / embryo / rolled / in / a / scroll" (n.pag) reveals that the meaning within which the embryo is encircled is both historical and discursive, as captured in the image of the "scroll," while the possibility of communication and speech is captured when the "ridge / gives / rise / to / gut / tied / tongue / tugs / the / lingual / hinge" (n.pag). The fetal body forming is rendered where

the "thick / trunk / unleashes / leaf / limb / bud / tender / lotus" (n.pag), and the intrauterine soundscape of the mother's heartbeat is described as "voice / boxed / in / ears / echo / deeper / pounding / tympa / tym / panic / rhythm / of / a / heart / some / w)here" (n.pag). The "w)here" of the heart is separated so that "here" is isolated, where the beating heart lies. It is the "here" of the womb, and also the "here" of the maternal heart. Tostevin also phonically and linguistically connects back to the "O" used previously to demarcate conception in the poem which describes and almost dissects the corporeal parts of the growing fetus: "eye / ball O / n stalk / sucks / brain / flows / Over / lid / fOld" (n.pag), except now it is a globular "O" that captures vision and consciousness in the "eye" and "brain," each of which are excessive and over-flowing. Drodge notes that "[t]he alliterative abundance of this lyric acts as a type of transparency to the plenitude of the mothering body" and that the collection cultivates "a hermeneutic based on a more natural process of becoming" (203), and one that is furthermore "generated by the maternal body rather than a more general and ambiguous nature" (203-204).

The fetus continues to form, "wisp / of / rib / body's / first / articulations / broach / bone / by / bone" (Tostevin *Gyno* n.pag), and maintains its connectivity to the uterus which houses it: "uterine / tattoo / your / indelible / code / tapped / against / your / small / cell / wall" (n.pag). The shelter that the maternal body provides for the growing fetus is captured in the poem that follows, "& / belly / bells / in / abdominal / dome / wells / inside / out" (n.pag). The "inside / out" gestures to the extent to which these poems make maternal interiority both discursively and imaginably intelligible, inverting the inside so that it becomes visible outside. The "indelible / code / tapped" is also one of procreative possibility, contained within the outwardly welling "abdominal / dome" (n.pag). Another French poem then highlights the connection between expression, speech and the pregnant body, "*cordon / rond / dit / ronronnement* / *arrondit / le /*

*ventre / au / verbe*" (n.pag). The purring round cord, or round cord which purrs, encircles or rounds the belly to the verb (my translation), assigning expressive possibility to the umbilical cord and connecting it explicitly to language. Tostevin then continues to focus on the materiality of the developing child across another dozen poems: "palate / joined," "heart / hollow / divides," and "lanugo / hairs / lunula / nails / ten / half / moons / struck" (n.pag). The "vena / cava / excavates / runs / its / ruts / & / turns" (n.pag), and the ears form as well: "cochlea / cocks / an / ear / to / tides / whorls / & / sinews" (n.pag). And finally, the neuronal development becomes complete, as the baby's "brain / blooms / white / webs / hemmed / in / spheres / hung / loose / ly" (n.pag).

Finally, at the end of the series, our perspective shifts to an external contemplation of the transformed maternal body, ready to give birth to and nurse her child: "dark / areoles / circle / nipples / black / raw / nib / in / silk / milk" (n.pag). And the last two poems in the series bring us to the moment of birth, as labour is described as follows: "mute / skeleton / moves / to / muscle / string / pulled / taut / from / A / to / Zone," where the bones and muscles shift and stretch to allow the baby passage into its life outside the womb. The actual moment of birth happens in three brief lines in French, "*vagin / vagir / enfin,*" which translates to "vagina / wail / finally," with the baby passing out of the mother's flesh, and either the mother cries out or the child takes its first breath and cries (or both simultaneously), concluding with the relief of "*enfin*" or "finally."

In the Afterword to *Gyno-Text*, Tostevin reveals the extent to which she was inspired by the corporeal feminisms, philosophies, and texts of Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray, Brossard, Rich, Lillian Allen, and Jacques Derrida. She reveals that the title, *Gyno-Text*, is a play on Kristeva's concepts of the *phéno-texte* and *géno-texte* that comprise poetic language, where the "phenotext

[is] the familiar language of communication, the formula of linguistic analysis" (Tostevin *Gyno* n.pag) and "genotext operates at a level which doesn't necessarily reflect normal structures but generates elements of language in process" (n.pag). It from within this "language rooted in something beyond language" that *Gyno-Text* emerges, "[a] sprouting which develops slowly as a seed instead of sentence… At the ridge where becoming of subject is affirmed and developed through process" (n.pag). Carrière notes that "[b]y using the metaphor of motherhood in the structuring of her book and by making her own text a *matrix* for the play of words, Tostevin explores this idea of genotext as yet another driving component of textuality. Moreover, she directly links this component to the maternal body itself" (123). Elsewhere, Tostevin has also affirmed the importance of the relationship between her motherhood and her writing. In a plenary address to the Association of Canadian and Quebec Literatures, published in *Open Letter* in 2007, Tostevin reveals that the boundaries between her various self-identities—Anglophone vs. Francophone, mother vs. writer—had completely broken down: "I wrote mainly in English but I wasn't an Anglophone. I wasn't less than an Anglophone, in fact, because I spoke another language, I may have been a little more… I was a mother but because I was also a writer, I wasn't less of a mother, I was more" (Tostevin "Mistaken" 25).

**Di Brandt: *mother, not mother***

Di Brandt is another Canadian writer and academic who has devoted a considerable amount of literary and scholarly attention to motherhood, and the intersection between maternity and creativity. Brandt herself has expressed her own self-awareness about her academic and literary interest in motherhood, observing in a 2008 essay published as part of the anthology *Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood,* that "[t]his is a topic that has preoccupied me greatly

over the years; three of my book titles have the word 'mother' in them (*questions i asked my mother; mother, not mother;* and *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature…*)" and that furthermore, "all of my writing has been in some way centred around the recuperation and restoration of maternal energies, in me, in my relationships with other people, in my intellectual work" ("My Breasts" 58-59). My interest here is in her 1992 collection, *mother, not mother*, which privileges a maternal perspective and subjectivity, and contains lyric poems which focus on the corporeality of pregnancy and early motherhood. Sheldon Fisher notes that this "third volume… [is] dedicated to her own two daughters" (32) and that "[p]sychological questions regarding the emotions and character of motherhood… and literary questions of how one actually goes about inscribing maternity, all emerged directly in Brandt's poetic re-viewing of experience" (33). And while most critics of Brandt's work have engaged with her texts through the lens of her Mennonite heritage, even noting that her criticisms and disavowals of her familial and cultural legacy do not allow her any escape from this literary lens (Zacharias 42), I argue that her maternal poetry does in fact transcend this discursive boundary often and engages with the transnational feminist discourses of the body present in other maternally-themed texts of the late-twentieth century. After all, "Brandt… has engaged in the Canadian feminist literary community in a significant way… creating [an] intellectual hom[e]… in literary and academic communities" far beyond her Mennonite upbringing (Hostetler 89). In *Wild Mother Dancing*, Brandt reflects on her early poetic inspirations, citing key theorists of the second-wave as foundational to both her scholarly and creative work. She explains,

> I began to write poetry, circling around the question of the absent mother, exploring the mother's problematic absence/presence in language intuitively, rhythmically, through sound and image. Through the writing of three consecutive volumes [of poetry]… I

> began to formulate the argument of this book, supported by current feminist theory, notably that of Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Marianne Hirsch, that the mother has been so largely absent in Western narrative, not because she is unnarratable, but because her subjectivity has been violently, and repeatedly, suppressed. (Brandt *Wild* 7)

Brandt's maternal poems can thus be read as a resistance to and a refusal of the patriarchal silencing of the mother in literary and cultural discourse, and especially in *mother, not mother*, "in which the voice of the mother is taken on more fully than before" (Fisher 39). Brandt's maternal poems engage viscerally with the body, and often express emotions which continue to be taboo for mothers, such as frustration and anger.

In the first of the collection's untitled poems, Brandt confronts the figurative impossibility of the mother-writer, asking of her imagined speaker, "why can't she write *the mother*, / though she has birthed two children" (Brandt *mother* 9). The biological reality of her motherhood is reinforced in the materiality of caring for her children, as she "spends half her day feeding clothing / sheltering them" and "picking up dirty rolled up socks / cooking macaroni" (9). She contrasts the myriad activities of motherhood, from birth-giving to cooking and tidying up, with the difficulty of declaring her maternity, of inscribing her identity in tangible words, even though it occupies "half her day[s]" and has encompassed the bodily experience of pregnancy and labour. Fisher likewise notes that "the strangeness of writing in the mother-voice… is confronted at the outset" of the collection and that it reveals a particular kind of "writer's block" (39). However, Brandt pushes past this discursive difficulty of maternal self-identification, shifting her poetic attention to the bodily suffering and transformation that motherhood has wrought: "she has stretched herself thin / scarred skin over bloated belly, /

watched leftover blood shoot clotted / like fists from her emptied womb" (Brandt *mother* 9). The violence of the "scarred skin" and the "fists" of "blood" that are "shoot[ing]" from her womb belies romanticized and sentimentalized notions of the mother as passive, gentle and weak. In fact, it is a direct refutation of these very tropes. As Brandt observes in her essay for *Double Lives*, "Motherhood, it seemed, has acquired many negative associations in contemporary culture that I had not anticipated and didn't really understand, such as 'weakness' and 'exploitation' and 'sentimentality' and 'softness' and 'passivity.' To me, mothering seemed directly the opposite of these associations in every way, requiring great strength, cunning, fierceness, political vision, and the ability to multitask on a daily, hourly basis" ("My Breasts" 56). Of the difficulty of the undertaking of motherhood, Brandt's speaker continues: "she's exhausted herself, black / & blue, many times / mothering the goddamn fucking world" (*mother* 9). Her frustration is palpable, and she renders her exhaustion in the form of physical bruises, which leave her "black / & blue," making material and corporeal that familiar sense of tiredness which is otherwise merely felt. She renders intelligible the weariness of the mother with the violence of bodily injury. And yet, even in her lyric expression of maternal struggle, she declares her difficulty in expressing a maternal subjectivity: "why can't she write herself around / that, / why she can't put down simply, / *i am the mother,* / & leave it like that" (9). Of course, the paradox of this first untitled poem is that, even as Brandt's speaker is declaring the impossibility of inscribing and occupying the subjectivity of her role as mother, the poem is functioning to do precisely what it claims it cannot. It is an expression of motherhood as fraught, difficult and injurious, and while the speaker is unable to "write herself around / that," she manages to write directly *through* it, by expressing that which is inexpressible—the maternal anger and resentment that is borne of "mothering the goddamn fucking world" (9).

Another poem a few pages later returns to the ferocity and corporeality of the mother, once again writing against essentialized representations of the maternal. It opens with "the great dark rush of mothering, / the pleasure in it, / the deep need, the suck, the *give,* / *give, give, give, give* of it" (12). Depicted as a "dark rush" of "pleasure," deeply desired, Brandt conjures the intensity of the erotic to depict the mother's connection to her nursing baby, and the sacrificial giving of the mother to her children, not as martyrdom but as a bodily surrender. The sense of interconnection between the mother and her children persists even as the children grow and gain more independence: "your hands won't let them go, / you clutch the air / wildly after them—so soon after / they've taken their fill" (12). Once again, Brandt captures the effects of motherhood in visceral, bodily terms, as the children seem to depart so soon after they have "slit open your belly, trampled / your sheets, / wanting to be gone" (12). The mother's "slit open… belly" from which her children emerge appears to reference birth by caesarian section, but it is collapsed into a more metaphoric image of the children cutting their way out of her body, "trampl[ing]" over the bed and seeking their freedom. The speaker then reflects on the protectiveness that characterizes motherhood, a constant awareness of dangers and threats to one's children: "the colour mothers see most often / is red, / remembering, fiercely, in the / night, tiger's eyes" (12). The ferocity of the mother's love, characterized by the colour red, is rendered as primal and primordial, as the red is mirrored in "firelight, the slight parting of / tall grass, cat's feet, / eyes narrowed into slits, claws / poised, ready to kill:" (12). Here, it becomes clear that the wild cat is, in fact, the mother herself who is "poised, ready to kill:" by the colon that concludes the sentence and is followed by the list of threats from which she seeks to protect her children: "marauders, intruders, every / dangerous outsider" (12).[108]

[108] Included in the list of potential dangers the mother is prepared to kill are "the fathers for not being there / when it mattered," missing out on "the children's spectacular / hit & run" (12-13). As in many of the other texts I have

A poem that follows a few pages later celebrates the magnificence of the pregnant body. The speaker opens with a nod to Jane Austen, "let me tell you, dear reader, / about the time / my body was a ship" (16). It is in this ship that "i / sailed the seas / of downtown Toronto" (16). Brandt represents the ship as beautiful and bountiful, "sails billowing, / full of wind, spirit breath, / baby's breath" (16). She is admired by "the Portuguese construction / workers on Huron Street" who "whistled / through their teeth / & grunted, / *ah, now, there's a mama*" (16), while "the young men on Bloor / averted their eyes" (16) when confronted with her glorious body. The mother encounters "the young women in the park / coming suddenly into view, / with their strollers on the green / grass" (16), a vision of her future motherhood. She continues "sailing / down the sidewalks past them, / glorious in my pride" (16). Once again, she invokes Jane Austen to declare her self-love and her pleasurable engagement with her own pregnant body, an ironic invocation considering the deeply erotic tones of the poem, far more explicit than Austen would ever have been: "ah, dear reader, let me tell you / how i loved my body then" which she describes in explicit detail: "my huge floating belly, my nipples / big, dark, swollen / with milk" that is "leaking desire, / golden, liquid, / all over the bed & the pillow / & the floor" (16-17). Her eroticism then turns outward, to the father of her child, "ah, how i loved my lover then, / who filled me with such bounty, / erotic trembling, oceanic bliss" (17). She recalls their continued love-making through her pregnancy, "smacking, sucking, stroking / my sunlit prow, big with child" (17). She then finds her subjectivity submerged within her own pregnant flesh, noting that "it was then, dear reader, / my brain sank into my womb, / dark lipped, bearded, dripping: / with child, with child, with child" (17). Finally, the poem returns to the exteriority of the mother,

---

examined, Brandt's speaker is critical of the lack of involvement of the paternal figure in her children's lives, which may be related to the biographical fact that Brandt herself became a single mother with sole custody of her two children when she was still in graduate school (Brandt "My Breasts" 58).

walking down the street, employing once again the analogy of a magnificent ship: “such a grand billowing / on the high seas, such unfurling, / such a mighty flowering among / the busy streets, / expecting, pregnant” (17).

The next poem focuses on the early days with a newborn and the physical exhaustion that often characterizes this time in a new mother’s life, but Brandt also reveals the ways in which the deep, corporeal symbiosis between mother and child develops alongside the mother’s growing love and attachment to her child, and works to compensate for and assuage the difficulties of the postnatal period. She chronicles the hardships of the solitary work of maternal care, “without sleep, / without pay, / without help, / words, / companions, / a break” (18). The tiredness and solitude create a sense of restlessness and confusion: “your mind bouncing / off walls”, with “eyes blurred / with exhaustion” (18). However, Brandt reveals that the antidote to this disorientation is the centrality of the baby itself, and the interdependence between mother and child, when “you saw yourself / in the dark pool / of your baby’s eyes” (18-19). The gaze between mother and baby establishes the mother’s importance and centrality, as she sees herself in her “baby’s eyes” as “a goddess, the source, / the very planet” (19). The symbiosis between them is corporeal and foundational: “your breaths flowing / together, / your breasts filled / with milk & honey. / all night, you were / the earth, / rocking” (19). The unity of their breath, her breasts a source of nourishment and her arms a source of comfort, renders the maternal body as elemental as the earth itself.

Brandt’s maternal poems which think through corporeality and the material, experiential aspects of motherhood function to refuse romanticized and idealized visions of the mother, instead demonstrating the often visceral difficulties, fears and frustrations of early motherhood. In this sense, Brandt not only refuses the silence that patriarchal discourse has imposed on

motherhood, but also its essentialized myths of maternal gentleness and contentment. Brandt's corporeal poems in *mother, not mother* explore the eroticism and symbiosis often experienced by pregnant and nursing mothers respectively, but also the discomforts and hardships new mothers often face. She thus exposes both the suffering and the joy of new motherhood beyond the limitations of patriarchal expectations and discourse, and does so through an intimate and visceral engagement with maternal corporeality. The title of her aforementioned 2008 essay for *Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood,* "My Breasts Had Become Eyes," reveals the extent to which Brandt's conception of her own maternal experience is intimately connected to the body, and her writing practice involves thinking *through* the body. She explains the genesis of the title in a dream she once had: "I dreamed that my breasts had acquired the most beautiful turquoise blue shaded eyelids, with lovely eyelashes that fit snugly and perfectly over my nipples. When I awoke, I understood that my breasts had become eyes, beaming beautiful white light both inward and outward" (Brandt "My Breasts" 59-60). A Buddhist friend explains that this is likely "the imagine of Tara, the Buddhist avatar of compassion and maternal love, who has eyes in her breasts and in her hands and in her feet" (60). Brandt then explains that "[t]his is how mothering and creativity and writing have come to mean… very much the same thing for me, how they are intricately woven together in my life, now" (60).

**"the body becomes narrative": Su Croll's *Blood Mother***

Alberta-based poet Su Croll's second collection, *Blood Mother* (2008), is perhaps the most focused of the texts in this section on the physicality and corporeality of motherhood. The title itself connects the maternal to the sanguinity of the most elemental of bodily fluids, which is foundational to life itself, but also intimately connected with female reproduction through

menstruation and post-partum lochia. The rich lyric poems that follow chronicle all the phases of maternity, from conception and pregnancy to birth and nursing. Among the opening poems is "alphabet," which explicitly connects language to the body, and reveals the extent to which pregnancy transforms the body into narrative. It opens with the contemplation of an ultrasound image of the newly-conceived fetus, noting that "this is how we house pregnancy / and how pregnancy houses us" and "as each word  each key / stroke  each flick and pull / of the page makes letters" so too do their "meanings inhabit the book / of the body" (16). The "book / of the body" merges language and narrative with the corporeal, as "each printing brands / this sudden kick / start as life" (16). The speaker then notes that "the beginning / of life gets its hooks into us" and "the body becomes narrative / unfolding" (16). The pregnant maternal body contains within it a natural, temporal progression, as the typical fetus grows according to a fixed 40-week schedule of development, "a steady accruing of detail / at 2 weeks it is smaller than the letter / 'a' on this page" (16). Its small vulnerability leads the mother to fear miscarriage, as "I anticipate / blood" and yet "am infused / with enriched letters growing into / a word bathed in fertility" (16). This tiny, growing constellation of cells is also "becoming the smallest subject / for poetry" (16). The fetus, no more than the size of a single typeset letter, multiplies daily, letter by letter, until it becomes "a word" and then, finally, "the smallest subject / for poetry" (16). This fetal subject is lodged firmly within the maternal body, a "budding fruit / of the abundance of my belly / this possibility and me" are joined irrefutably. The mother imagines the interiority of her own body and that of her growing child, "peeking through the smallest door / smallest window in the house / to the world outside this box of heat / until the alphabet is complete" (16).

With "annunciation," Croll's speaker recounts an ultrasound confirming her pregnancy, "nine weeks / full of water  my secret is revealed" (17). What had been interior and hidden is

rendered suddenly visible, "what the technician names *baby* / a white throbbing / sheltering under my pelvic bone  *the heart*" (17). The poem notes twice that it is "december 13" which is "feast day of st lucia" which "suggests what is lucid / what is light and what can be seen / in light," and that "on this dark december morning / a child is suggested" (17). The illumination of the growing child nestled within the mother is once again correlated to words and narrative, as the "ultra sound is simple / truth  an illuminated manuscript / the story of this life inscribes itself" (17). The interiority of the maternal body is rendered visible through the ultrasound, full of potentiality, where "inside my body where a second heart blooms / and I see flashing like lightning / what will be a baby" even though it is yet "a curled near-nothing / through the magnifying gold / fish bowl of my bladder" (17).

In another poem that follows, "pickles," she recalls ridiculous advice given to heavily pregnant women decades earlier who were awaiting labour: "they say to carry a jar of pickles / you can drop if you are concerned / about your water breaking at a bus stop" (20). The gush of amniotic fluid that sometimes signals the beginning of labour is revealed to be a potential source of shame: "if you are worried what is inside / with shame and abruptness will spring / a leak and flood outside" with what was "once a stormless ocean / in your belly  bursting free / and flowing to your ankles" (20). This slippery boundary between inside and outside, and that which was inside escaping its corporeal boundaries, is—as I discuss earlier in the chapter—generative of significant cultural and ontological anxiety around the mother.[109] Croll's poem can be interpreted, then, as expressing not only the "worry" and "shame" that the pregnant woman

[109] As Kristeva explains in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* the intense prohibitions of the maternal body stem, at least in part, from the horror generated by the symbolic threat posed by "the collapse of the border between inside and outside" (*Powers* 53) and the polluting assumptions of both excrement and menstrual blood (71). While psychoanalytic theories of castration anxiety and incest taboos are not quite relevant here, it is worthwhile to note that Kristeva also highlights the potency of the ontological threat posed by the maternal body.

might feel at this spontaneous eruption of her own body, but as also resisting this impulse, as she mocks the cultural imperative to conceal the burst amniotic fluid with pickle juice. She writes, "that round jar of kosher dills salty / salvation pulled from inside your coat / and thrust to the sidewalk as your own / brine stains your underwear" (Croll 20). The "salty / salvation" is rendered even more comic by the fact that she reveals that "I'm picturing / some kind of harpo-marx coat stuffed / with rubber chickens" through which "you are / saved and glass and vinegar and cucumbers / smash away from themselves" (20). Finally, the recognition of the absurdity of the pickle jar and the shame it is supposed to alleviate is affirmed in the "delicious / splash of acid and salt coating your tongue / from the crash and you laugh" (20). The mother's laughter is playful and empowered, for she is the one who "dropped the jar while it is the drip / then bursting dam of your own kid / you are ready to drop" (20). The force of the "bursting dam" contrasted against the silliness of a broken pickle jar emphasizes the monumental significance of the birth about to take place over any cultural or social imperative to conceal the realities of the birthing maternal body.

The poem that follows, "what I forget," features a mother's paradoxical claim to forgetfulness when recalling her labour, even as she conjures its visceral details: "I forget my first labour and all its fury / they say we forget what the body must" (21). She describes the pain of labour as "that underworld demon / all black heat and surgically sharp teeth" that "will burst the cervical maw / of the wet earth and gnash and tear / the labouring muscle we become" (21). Despite the attempts of the nurse who teaches the "labour and delivery class" to get the expectant mothers to view the pain of labour as purposeful, and instructed the expectant mothers to have "a focal object / a stone  a feather  a photograph," the reality of the birth remembered is that of pain which "blossoms / purple then red  a sea demon churning the air / of the labour room my

body is swallowed into" (22). The pain obliterates her subjectivity and explodes her sense of herself: "I splinter out / into several spiralling directions" as "my body calls pain to itself / in a voice I cannot recognize as my own" (22). Ultimately, the poem reveals that the supposed forgetting of the pain of labour is actually a process of transcendence, pushing past the pain into a renewed, empowered sense of self. She writes that " "I forget everything / the pulsing red-walled labour room" as well as the child being born: "I forget the child / relinquishing / her amniotic inland sea" (22). but nonetheless, in this apparent void, the poem's speaker finds herself once again: "at the centre of pain  I forget / I forget I'm inside the body's fury / my body / my fury" (22). However, once this forgetting takes place, the birthing mother is liberated, as she reveals in the concluding lines of the poem that she now floats, "free of the sutured surface / and all pain / all fury is forgotten" (22).

The poem "sucking," opens with Croll's declaration in the opening line that "I need to be literal," and within this exactitude, she declares, "at the beginning of every life there is nothing / but sucking  sucking is instinct / survival" (31). This most primal form of nourishment involves "taking that jet of hot milk / shot into the mouth and learning / to swallow in the world" (31). The equation of breastmilk with "the world" emphasizes its importance to sustaining life, and highlights the foundational nurturance that the lactating breast provides for a newborn.[110] Croll directly highlights the limitations of metaphors by observing that "no metaphor can encompass" what happens when the baby is "outside the wet of the womb" and "learning to swallow / before the mouth / overfills" (31). She notes that "the world is held / in suction" and "there is / no metaphor / for milk" (31). Once again, Croll explicitly correlates the body to language, as "there

[110] It must be noted that not all mothers lactate or breastfeed their children. Some are unable to do so, and others choose not to. While the poems celebrate and venerate the centrality of breastfeeding to the author's own experiences of mothering, my analysis is not intended to delegitimize or devalue bottle- or formula-feeding.

is only this / hard language of demand / there is only the breast answering" (31). The language of bodily hunger, and the response of the maternal breast in reply, is irreducible, as Croll insists, "I need / to be literal  all life / craves" (31). She is not interested in any flowering, warm descriptors or symbols, but rather, she declares that "I want / this line unadorned" and to only capture that which is "true and essential / the final thick cream / of the emptying breast" (31). The collection follows a chronological progression of poems, as later selections explore Croll's desire to have—and subsequent pregnancy with—a second child.

In "inscription," Croll correlates her literary vocation with the landscape of her own body, beginning with "my identity is made of paper / I am laced together with words" (69). She is the embodiment of the written word, "felted to fine thin sheets / compacted into what can be read" (69). The centrality of words and language to her identity is then grafted onto her pregnant body, with "enmeshed fibres taking on shape  the body / fit into the substance of pregnancy" (69). She and her unborn child have been transformed into "a skin / of words hosting this willed act pressed into the scant / wet flesh of meaning" (69). The merging of the fetus with the words describing it render it substantive and meaningful. Writing is also likened to a liminal state that is creative and generative, where "the poem fires the white-sand / sheet of the body to be read / as a pregnant woman is written" (69). The writing and reading of the "pregnant woman" is the poem itself, connected through history, "where papyrus / puts down roots under a scripted wave of syntax" (69). The next stanza gestures towards new possibilities of creativity and meaning, "opening blank space  filling / incrementally with life" (69). More specifically, it is "the female body / in a sea of open-mouthed vowels and shards / of consonants" (69). Here, Croll suggests that "the female body" is open country for the imagination as it is slowly articulated and described through an expanding and limitless use of language. It is a "sky / a torn open

manuscript / a cloudburst of nouns" with "verbs raining down as hard / handwriting hammering out a second skin" (69). The "second skin" can be allusively related to Beauvoir's "second sex," as this new and hitherto unarticulated body comes into literary view. The poem meditates further on "the sustained black working of type / incised onto the unconscious blank page," and the "glossaries ebbing up to the skin / surface and out to the top margins" (69). Here the skin of the body and the skin of paper are conflated, and Croll's speaker declares that "I want paper / embedded with language  plankton-like letters / boldly ripening into meaning" and "words swollen / floating all around me and there is my need to write / out to the edges" (69). The "swollen" "words" become corporeal and merge with that of the speaker, "my skin / bearing the inscription of nascent words as paper / is flecked with markings forming text," becoming "a wrapping of self parcelled out to paper over / these wet walls of pregnancy" (69). The ways in which the pregnant body is made public by its shape and size, and the ways in which it is read by others makes of it a "text," where the "wet walls of pregnancy" are made visible through the transformed maternal body. And yet, it is also very much an empowering experience as well and one that fills the speaker with pride, "floating my body / above and outside ordinary space / teasing out a second heart with its blood" (69). The growing baby is likened to an "anchor already inside me and I revel in this shift / from singular body to maternal wrapping  my finest paper" (69).

The inescapability of the body in pregnancy, especially into the third trimester and in the final weeks, is explored in "in the end," where the subjectivity of the mother is effectively subsumed in her corporeality. Of the early days of pregnancy, the speaker reflects, "in the beginning  I am myself," wholly self-contained and self-assured. However, "in the end  I am tethered to my son's placenta / in the end  I am only a uterus / amplified to the size of a child  I

am only body" (70). This reductive experience of pregnancy as pure physicality continues with a detailing of the various, key body parts of which the speaker is formed: "head and heart  my belly and brain cleaved / two hemispheres" (70). The two hemispheres are not that of the brain, but of that dividing the body from the mind, echoing patriarchal philosophical traditions which firmly divide the corporeal from the intellectual, where there is "one of the world  one floating above / the baseness of body" (70). Her corporeality is taken over in pregnancy, wherein she notes that "my body is everything for the son / about to be forced from me into the cold / noise of oxygen at the second of his birth" (70). The "belly" is "of the world," whereas the "brain" is "floating above," lacking substance and importance. Instead, her "body is everything" (70). In fact, the sum-total of her existence is summarized as "a 38-week old body  that is all I am" (70). Her age, here, is not rendered in her actual, biological age, but in the age of the fetus within, and so it is not only the baby that is 38-weeks, but her too. She contemplates herself in a mirror, and the way her pregnant abdomen has taken up all the space: "I behold my breadth / of a belly" as she looks at herself "spanning the long / slim space of a full-length / mirror" and she is "surprised at how little / is left of me in the gravity / of these last flourishing weeks" (70). The speaker feels subsumed by her pregnancy, that there is "little … left of" her. Her sense of self is fractured and fragmented: "my self / my former self split off / set adrift" (70). The poem then shifts forward in time, observing that her future self "will be surprised at my future / son's terror over this photograph / when told he is inside" (70). She reveals "how he will run to the mirror to find his / face and body are his own" and are "not trapped / under my stretched skin" (70). This filial fear of the maternal body, with its Kristevan overtones, is pushed aside, however, by the mother's reiteration of her own voice, even as she finds herself intertwined with her son on a cellular level: "but it's me  I'm the one ensnared / I am absorbed into the snarled / bloodlines of

my son" (70). The poem chronicles how "in the end / nights are infused with insomnia" with "blue veins / pulsing under the white volcanic surface / of my skin" (71). In comparison to the expansiveness of her pregnant belly, everything else is diminished: "breasts small / beside this eruption of belly" and "everything small / beside what my body has become" (71). Once again, she reiterates, "I am only body  only doctor's / tape circling  measuring seven days' growth / and I measure every step" (71). The poem concludes with another repetition: "in the end  there will be labour and delivery / and an infant needing the unbroken clock / of constant wakefulness" (71).

In "puzzle," Croll expands her poetic gaze to contemplate the maternal body more generally, and the ways in which it is culturally and socially inscribed: "our bodies are riddled / with meaning until we are nothing / but body" with significance that is external and superimposed, "meaning slapped over / our skins" (92). Croll highlights the ways in which the female body is subject to inspection, critique and projected assumptions, "dragging us down / to earth" (92). The body becomes "the puzzle of women / beyond age and beauty / undefinable" and yet subject to sociocultural scrutiny: "what the female body is  has been / and is becoming is the question / is the answer we are held to" (92). The inescapability of the body for women is "our context in the world" as we are "defined by the body that contains us" and "held completely / inside our very coating / of the feminine" (92). Here there is no subversion or radical reimagining, but an acknowledgment of the ways in which the body and its varying life stages, from "girl" to "woman" to "pregnant / woman" to "old woman," all become "definable point[s] / on the body's drifting map" (92).

The eponymous poem of the collection, "blood mother," rethinks the iconic image of the Madonna and child, focusing her attention on the lactating breast that is a nourishing "god."

Rather than interpreting this iconography metaphorically, Croll steadies her poetic gaze on the breastfeeding that is merely alluded to in religious art. She begins, "in art  god sucks life / from the breast of the virgin", a de-sexualized "hard breast held like a lean pear / in his hands" (81). That "god" himself nurses suddenly renders the Virgin Mother more powerful and essential, even though "this picture is christened / madonna of humility" and the common interpretation of the image has it that "in giving life  she is drained / of power" (81). However, Croll purposefully subverts this relationship, positing rather that "god / grows fat" on his mother's milk, which is usually rendered distant and remote by its being "mirrored in the painted / air above her as stars / of the milky way" that frequently "decorate ceilings / in church" (81). This distancing of the imagery of milk is something that Croll rescues from the margins and brings directly to the centre of her poem: "her name is humility / as if the milk is not everything" (81). The totality and vital importance of breastmilk is further celebrated, as Croll describes "this wash of milk from the human mother" that is "gifted from the body / of a woman grafted to the god of the word" (81). Here, Croll directly connects the Christian iconography to the nursing mother, reaffirming the power of the Virgin Mother through her corporeality and her lactation. Of the importance of the breastfeeding "god," she notes, "god / is overwhelmed with the sweet / goodness" of his earthly mother, "who takes away the hurt / of his hunger" (81). In fact, it is her sustenance and maternal care that allows him to fulfill his venerated role. The Virgin is "his huge / eternal blood mother shrugging / away the painted halo," thus refusing her saintly veneration and simply embodying the bountiful maternal, "as she draws her child / to herself" so that he is then able "to put away / the pain of the world" (81). As the eponymous poem of the collection, Croll's "blood mother"/*Blood Mother* both elevates the quotidian and corporeal elements of her own experiences of motherhood to the status of the iconic Madonna, but also subverts the

Christian iconography of Western art. Both interpretative perspectives are radical re-imaginings of the mother, whose corporeality and lactation are given centrality and prominence. It is not just the importance of the mother in Christian iconography that Croll wishes to highlight—Marian veneration is a well-established aspect of Catholicism, for example—but her bodily contribution to the sustenance of her son via breastmilk. Croll thus subverts the traditional, aestheticized and essentialized concept of the purity of the mother, and inserts in its place the bodily, birthing, lactating, bleeding mother. Her insistence on an unflinching portrayal of the corporeal aspects of motherhood is a radical re-imagining of historical representations of the maternal.

**Susan Holbrook: *Joy is so Exhausting***

Canadian poet and academic Susan Holbrook published her third collection, *Joy is so Exhausting,* in 2009, which is characterized by a number of postmodern tropes such as playful use of puns, pastiche, parody, transpositions and appropriations. And unlike the other collections published within the last decade or two, Holbrook's is not exclusively or even mostly focused on motherhood, with the notable exception of the first and last poems. As such, the poetic musings that comprise *Joy is So Exhausting* are bookended by motherhood, and the title is taken from the final line of the concluding poem. In this way, motherhood becomes the framework of the collection, even as the individual poems may veer off into innovative, unexpected and unrelated directions (unlike, by contrast, Croll's *Blood Mother*, which is almost exclusively rooted in maternal experience and corporeality).

Holbrook's opening poem, "Really Just," begins with an epigraph attributed to American author Michael Pollan, which reads: "*To guide us we had, instead, Culture, which at least when it comes to food, is really just a fancy word for your mother*" (Holbrook 9). The centrality of the

mother to "food" and "culture" is then reiterated in the opening line of the poem, which begins, "Mother is really just food / Food is really just culture / Culture is really just east / East is really just a hen" (9). The poem continues with associative word play, veering far away from the figure of the mother which opened it. However, the primacy of the mother to sustenance and nurturance—the fact that she "is really just food"—relates to both breastfeeding and the mother's role in food preparation. There is, however, a marked note of ambivalence, as the mother is reduced to nothing more than food, the "really just" of both the title and the sentence diminishing her complexity and erasing her subjectivity as a person.

However, Holbrook writes directly against this wry, reductive perspective in the poem "Nursery," which closes the collection. The speaker's inner thoughts and consciousness are refracted through the alternation between left and right breasts while nursing her child. In an interview with Heather Milne, Holbrook reveals that part of her compositional practice was to write while she was actually nursing (Eichhorn and Milne 48). Holbrook explains that "[a]ll the entries are minutiae—brief quoted advice from baby-care books… the minor physical inconveniences and frustrations of being moored to the futon by a feeding baby" (48). However, she wants to capture these fleeting and fragmentary moments before they are gone: "I knew all these details would be forgotten once I exited that altered state of new motherhood… I wanted a record of that charmed phase of my life, one that could somehow evade the clichéd romanticization of motherhood but, of course, ultimately convey afresh the beauty that inspired the clichés in the first place" (48). Holbrook further notes that her motherhood has changed her thinking around feminism, discovering "the wonder at the potential of the female body, … [and] the intimacy of nursing" (49).[111] While the poem itself is an expression of maternal interiority

[111] Holbrook also recalls the formative impression Marlatt's *Rings* made on her when she first read it in her twenties, explaining that "In that prose poem she includes what is edited out of the stork-and-bundle/baby-powdered miracle

and subjectivity, it is organized through the body, creating a syncopated series of images that constantly oscillate between her "Left" and "Right" breasts (Holbrook 72). As such, breastfeeding forms the organizing principle of the mother's often humorous and playful thinking. Holbrook also affirms that "[t]he time constraints of motherhood determined the form of 'Nursery,' as I realized no poetry was getting written and I'd better make my new life work for, rather than against, writing" (Eichhorn and Milne 48).

In the opening of the poem, the mother contemplates her nursing child, "Left: Trace pictograph of an elk in the fine veins of your temple. Right: If it were a Virgin Mary we'd be on the news" (Holbrook 72). Often the poem focuses on the materiality of breastmilk and physical caring for a baby: "Left: Try to sit you up for a burp, you're still latched on. Right: Milk drops leave shiny slug trails across your cheek" (72). Holbrook's speaker also meditates on the moments wherein she felt like a mother for the first time: "Left: Feeling like a mother didn't happen when you were born, or when I first fed you, or first used the word 'daughter.' It's happening six months later, in the dark, as a mosquito kazoos around and, without a second's hesitation, I pull up your covers, lay my bare arms on top of the blanket, whisper 'bite me.'" (72). The maternal protectiveness and instinct for self-sacrifice is highlighted as the moment where Holbrook's speaker self-identifies as a mother for the first time. She also reflects wryly on being the material conduit of milk for her child: "Left: I drink milk at the same time: Am I an elaborate step that could be skipped?" (73). Later, she marvels in disbelief and vague distaste at her new status as a lactating human, noting, "Left: I take 2%, you take hindmilk… Left: I have *hindmilk*" (74).

---

narratives of childbirth… Marlatt had managed to topple the overdetermined cultural scaffolding of that life event, and offer us through interleaving discursive modes a text that newly embodied this real" (Eichhorn and Milne 49).

She contemplates her baby while she eats, noting the uniquely newborn features: "Right: Your 'wrist' is a crease circling your fat arm like a too-tight string" and "Right: Dimples for knuckles" (74). The baby also begins to gaze back at its mother: "Left: Dark green eye keeps darting up at me, as if finally putting the face and the food together" (74). The recognition between mother and child begins to flow both ways, as the baby begins to focus on its mother's face for the first time. Holbrook also notes her own physiological responsiveness to her child's hunger as well: "Left: Beads of milk pop out before your mouth even gets there" (74) and "Right: The other side always lets down, twins the default setting. Left: You smile at a private joke, milk floods out the corners. Right: One for the road" (75). Holbrook also humorously reflects on the strange physical sensations of and reactions to nursing: "Right: No longer eating, you keep lips latched, flutter your tongue, tender moth or creepy guy" (76). Holbrook also notes some of the distinctly painful and unpleasant aspects of nursing: "Left: Here is the baby-care guide, which says I can catch thrush from you and could experience red, itchy, cracked and burning nipples and shooting pains while nursing. Finally, the kind of *mammaire verité* and deromanticization of motherhood the reader expected" (76). Holbrook's metafictional self-awareness acknowledges not only the expectations of a sophisticated reader but also her own deliberate writing-against the familiar, traditional tropes of the nursing mother.

The child begins to grow and teethe, which creates apprehension in the speaker: "Left: Just when I was being a smart aleck about deromanticization, a sharp tooth" (77), "Right: Ouch, there's the other tooth you cut this evening" (78), "Right: Emerging teeth like white stitches glowing in your gums" and "Right: I can never rest now, knowing the teeth are there, like a gun in a play" (79). And yet, the degree of interconnection between mother and child persists: "Right: You thump your palm on my chest, then your own, you and me, I agree, difficult to

distinguish. Left: Tethered to you…" (78). But with experience comes a certain degree of confidence and independence as well: "Right: I used to need two hands and a nursing pillow, now I can erase the hell out of two sudokus, you outside the halo of the booklight" (79). As the speaker notes with some pride, "Right: I'm no athlete but I could pitch for La Leche League" (81). However, the child insists on the continued interconnectivity of itself and its mother: "Left: You place your palm on my cheek and guide me away from the adult conversation, back to the appropriate downward adoring gaze" (80). Finally, Holbrook concludes with a sense of contentment and with the eponymous final line: "Right: You pat my belly, the old stomping grounds. Left: The plastic moon glints in the light of the real moon. Right: Joy is so exhausting" (82). The maternal body roots both mother and child in place, as both home for the child, and within the "nursery" of the child's room. The maternal/female moon is refracted twice, in the mobile and out the window, as the mother affirms her "joy," even amidst her exhaustion (82).

**Yi-Mei Tsiang: *Sweet Devilry***

Yi-Mei Tsiang's first poetry collection, *Sweet Devilry* (2011), captures both the struggles and joys of motherhood, from the birth of her daughter which opens the collection, to the early years of parenting a toddler. The poems also employ pastiche, writing back against dominant discourses of motherhood, particularly the Little Blue Books Household series, issued by Canada's Department of Health in 1923, and common fairy tales. Finally, towards the end of the collection, a series of poems deal with mortality, as Tsiang copes with the death of her father from cancer. Of the maternally themed poems, there are a handful that engage viscerally and critically with embodied motherhood and maternal corporeality.

The opening poem, “May 12, 2005,” is set on the day of the speaker’s daughter’s birth. Tsiang writes, “Oh, the morning of your birth / and I am a gutted fish” (Tsiang 11). The violent image of the fish with its entrails removed communicates the mother’s sense of both emptiness and raw pain. However, it is also a violence that is productive and valuable, as the new mother is “The one that swallowed a diamond ring / whole, pale belly split to reveal such / an unlikely wealth” (11). The baby within is a valued and expensive stone, a source of “unlikely wealth” (11). Amid the admittedly boring routines of the hospital, where “There’s not much to do” and “The nurses bring toast, / baby, pills, baby,” the mother finds that the “Drugs thicken my tongue; words drop, roll against slippers that lie / prone, hollowed” (11). Her hollowed slippers mirror the hollowed feeling she has post-partum, as a “gutted fish,” and yet between her and her child, a bodily symbiosis is forming. She observes how “The tender puff of flesh around / your eyes hushes the light” and feels, in her tiredness, a connection with her sleepy baby: “What can we do but curl around each other, / learn fatigue by its slow pull, / the deepening sink into colour, your eyes / practicing the shift / of dusk’s gray afterglow” (11). The advice the new mother imparts to her baby is nutritive and bodily: “What can I tell you? / Learn a good latch, kiddo-- / it pays to hold on / to someone you love” (11). The necessity of the baby’s latch and the connectivity to the mother through the breast is highlighted, as is her promise of responsiveness to her baby’s needs: “And holler little one, holler / until you can trust that the echo / of your voice will be me, / bending to your hunger” (12). The poem thus concludes on the image of the mother’s embrace, as she offers her breast to her hungry child. This introduction to motherhood is deeply rooted in the body, in both the emptiness of the post-partum period, the pain, the exhaustion, and also the new relationship and connection between mother and child through breastfeeding.

Mid-way through the collection and stretching across seven sparsely textualized pages is "On Surrendering," where Tsiang revisits and revises biological essentialist assumptions about women and mothers. While at first glance it appears Tsiang is reaffirming essentialist paradigms, in fact, in occupying them and bringing into visceral focus the fluidity and corporeality of the mother, she succeeds in re-appropriating these biological assumptions and finding within them a source of radical feminist empowerment. Her ideological approach has much in common with Irigaray's philosophy of corporeal feminism, where acknowledging and affirming the primacy of the female body becomes a foundation of strength. The poem opens with an apparent affirmation of common feminine tropes: "It's true what they say about women. Waving that white flag so handily; a skirt, a handkerchief, linens blowing across enemy lines" (78). This apparent passivity and capacity for surrender is actually revealed to be corporeal in origin, as

> Our bodies taught us this art of surrendering, loosened us so we could let go of
>
> blood
>
> milk
>
> children (78)

The blood of menstruation, miscarriage and lochia gives way to the milk of lactation, and the fully formed "children" to which mothers give birth. However, Tsiang cautions immediately afterwards, "There is a limit to what can be born" (78), articulating the finite resources of women and their bodies, while the double-play on the homophonic "born"/ borne, also gestures towards the limits of women's physical endurance.

The next page and stanzas of the poem begin to refract maternal experience through the surrender of the body: "Let your fist fall open, lie back: know that this child needs / so much more than blood" so much more than just the uterine environment, "that small space to / dream

bone, sinew, first muscle" (79). The opening fist mirrors the white flags of surrender, as it eases itself out of an aggressive positionality. The small, uterine space that accommodates the baby's first bodily development is only the beginning of the accommodation required by the mother to nurture her child. Tsiang exhorts the mother to "Breathe / and hold within yourself / a place for him—a burrow, warm, dark and large" (79). This must be space "enough to contain a name, a nest of bark, the almost-heat / of your body: a place deep enough / for a torpid winter's sleep" (79). This "burrow" of the mother's body is the space wherein a new subjectivity is formed, "contain[ing] a name," and its darkness and warmth is deep within the mother's flesh. However, this "nest of bark" is only temporary, as the next necessary step is to "Then let him slip from your body" (79). This gentle, easy release of the child into the world is a marked contrast to the violence, pain and physical effort that is represented in other birth poems addressed in this chapter. In Tsiang's poem, it is a gentle letting go of the child, a bodily surrender.

The following page contains only a single line, a reiteration of the opening line, that repeats throughout the poem: "It's true what they say about women" (80). Then, once again, Tsiang repeats the initial imagery,

> Our bodies taught us this art of surrendering,
> loosened us so we could let go of
> blood
> children
> milk (81)

It is noteworthy that here, she has rearranged the order of "blood / children / milk," highlighting the fact that this order is neither prescriptive nor pre-ordained, that it rather forms a constellation of possibilities and interrelationships, all of which are rooted in procreativity, sustenance and

nurturance, and each of which emanate from the body. Also necessary to and characteristic of motherhood is not only release, but being left, as the mother watches her children grow up and away from her: "Learn what it means to have been left" (81). But first, the speaker revisions the maternal body as a colonized space, addressing her growing fetus directly: "You staked your territory, embryo / flag planted / and the colonial demand for foreign customs" (81). Furthermore, the fetus "redrew / territorial lines of the body / (lungs, / spleen)"and in doing so, "Made way for your growing empire" (81). And again, Tsiang returns to the moment of birth-giving, but this time, returning bodily agency to the mother, acknowledging that, "Yes, there is an art to surrendering, the children, to bearing / that painful contraction, raw / unclenching and the held-breath push" in order to enact an inevitable "distance, separation, / so you can stand alone" (81). The pain and physical exertion of labour is emphasized, with the raw pain of contractions, and the mother pushing so hard she has to hold her breath to gather more strength behind it. And finally, the "distance" and "separation" that results is bodily, and both the child and the mother are left "stand[ing] alone" (81).

**Melanie Dennis Unrau: *Happiness Threads: The Unborn Poems***

Finally, the last of the recent texts that engage with the maternal body is Winnipeg-based Melanie Dennis Unrau's first poetry collection, *Happiness Threads: The Unborn Poems* (2013). The text is unique among recent maternally-themed publications in that Unrau deals explicitly with pregnancy loss and stillbirth, as well as incorporating poems which parody and incorporate the online world of message boards, which have emerged in the past ten years as a popular source of information-sharing for new mothers in particular. Like contemporaneous collections as well, though, Unrau also explores her own conflicted relationship with her domestic life as

mother to her two children, her decisions around work outside the home, and her own creative ambitions.

"d & c" confronts the bodily and emotional pain of pregnancy loss, a subject that remains largely taboo in social and cultural expression. Even among the dozens of novels, poems and memoirs I explore in these chapters, discussions of pregnancy loss remain sparse, even though according to the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada, miscarriages happen in 15-20% of pregnancies ("Miscarriage and Stillbirth" n.pag). Unrau, however, devotes a series of poems in *Happiness Threads* to her experiences of miscarriage and stillbirth. The opening stanza of "d & c," for example, recounts the moment when the mother realizes that her baby has no heartbeat: "every step sounds unbearable / watch the midwife's face as she searches / for a heartbeat" until she is finally able to "see the body / float on the dark screen" (Unrau 14). The floating fetal body is inert and captured in a metaphorical darkness. Unrau's speaker then recalls in a detached second-person perspective the procedure of the dilation and curettage (after which the poem is named), "drugged into labour  spread your legs / for indifferent interns" and then afterwards, "pace / the halls of blame the long hours of loneliness / wait for your body to release its grip" (14). Her self-blame, isolation and sense of lost dignity culminate in the procedure itself and briefly holding her half-formed child: "try your best to breathe / like you've seen in the movies / & when it's over hold him" (14). The finality and sorrow of the maternal embrace is captured in the acknowledgment that "this will be the only time" (14). The sadness gives way to a new awareness of the mother's emotional limits, and her strength, as she notes, "by now you know what you can bear / lay yourself on the operating table  veins / sucking on the dry needle" (14). In the background, the ambient noise is "music / humming on the stereo," punctuated only by the mother's invocative "whisper" to "empty me" (14). The quiet, whispered request to be

emptied can be understood as an arrival at acceptance and a taking back of some modicum of control over the bodily experience she is undergoing.

The poem from which Unrau takes part of her title, "unborn poems," is in four numbered sections, each of which occupies its own page in the text. The title appears at first to refer to poems about or for unborn children, lost to miscarriage or stillbirth. However, the epigraph Unrau chooses, by Canadian writer Debbie Keahey, suggests a doubled meaning, that the title may also refer to poems that were never born, and never came to fruition: "*i went out looking for them / but forgot what i was looking for / & lost them twice*" (16). The first stanza of section i. expresses the continued sense of connection the speaker feels to her unborn children: "the unborn are into telepathy  e.s.p  &  / out-of-body experience" (16). This eerie communion with extracorporeal beings is registered in a bodily response: "you sense them hovering over you / when your breasts ache & you hold / your empty belly" (16). The physiological remnants of pregnancy, captured in the mother's aching breasts, is contrasted against her now empty belly, as she senses the presence of the unborn around her. She renders their comfort in strange, otherworldly caresses: "the voices in your head are tiny / brown hands" of the dead fetus, that are "caressing your / sorrow wearing it down to something more / bearable" (16). The unborn children are innocent and silently apologetic, as Unrau notes that "they / never meant to hurt you / they had no idea" (16). Their final disconnection from the maternal body is rendered as a freedom from the mother's heartbeat: "this is how they leave  slip / out of their bodies" and are now able "to feel what it is to be free / of your droning heartbeat" (16).

Section ii. captures the mother's wishful desire that her unborn children somehow continue to miss her and the home her body provided. The speaker once again reaffirms the eternal life of the unborn, and the limbo of the womb they left behind: "the unborn never die /

like in that old gospel song / they fly away" (17). She projects a degree of agency and subjectivity onto fetal life, imagining that "in the limbo of womb  they dreamt / of an end anything / they took the easy way out" (17). The maternal body is described here as a liminal space, but one in which the fetus is given an imagined role in their fate. The mother indulges in a vaguely resentful wish that her unborn children miss her and her bodily home as much as she misses them:

> now you hope they dream of you
>
> wake with arms & legs flailing  reaching
>
> to touch your insides
>
> & you are not there (17)

And in the single stanza of section iii., the mother recalls something her midwife told her, that in some failed pregnancies, the fetus simply dissolves back into the mother's body, creating a corporeal fusion between mother and child: "the midwife told you something / the unborn dissolve / absorbed back into their mothers" (18). This reunification of the fetus and mother is conjured as an act of love on the part of the child, as Unrau writes that "they / like it that way," to be able "to leave without a trace / become the only person / they ever loved" (18).

Section iv. is a contemplation of the trauma of a late miscarriage and the fetal body, as well as its reverberations through maternal corporeality. The speaker recalls, "his body was brown & empty / skin clung to our fingers / when we tried to pull away" (19). The sticky half-formed skin and the old-blood-brown of discoloration is both horrifying in its intimations of decay and also mournful in the mother's pain of having her unborn child taken from her:

> the nurse took him from us  i cried
>
> as if this parting & not some

silent trauma

were the moment of his death (19)

The emptiness of the fetal body is mirrored in the emptiness the mother feels in being unable to care for and nurture her child, even as her body produces milk: “you can’t take the unborn home / your breasts may leak / but he is not hungry” (19). Rather than a full-fledged being in human form, “he is a polaroid” and the parents are left to make “guesses about eyes” and their colour (19). Rather than a baby to take home, the mother is left with “a useless name a strange smell / that lingers” (19). And instead of the cries of a newborn, all that is left is silence: “the sound of the / doppler machine  searching” (19). Rather than being alive and embodied, the child is silence itself: “he is the silence / between my heartbeats” (19).

As the collection progresses, the mourning of stillbirth gives way to joy as Unrau gives birth to two children. In “reclining buddha,” also in four numbered parts, she conjures the timelessness of a mother’s love and the bond with her children. In particular, Unrau highlights the universality and atemporality of the shared sleep of mothers and children, as the speaker contemplates her own young son and her experiences of nursing him in the middle of the night. He finds his way to her bed with his “whimpers and needs / bird mouth searching for my breast” and she draws him towards her into sustenance and shared sleep, remarking, “i know i will hold you the rest of the night” (39). She describes this bodily holding in detail, with the tactile sensations and smells of both his body and hers: “cup your bald head / in my hands soft / round smelling of birth,” which then becomes mixed with “my scent which comes stronger now / so you will know me” (39). She ends on a humorous note, observing that “your head will stink like / armpit from spending each night / here with me” (39). The tactile connection between them is captured in the mother’s scent on the child, and in their waking each morning bathed in

breastmilk, which Unrau correlates with maternal love: “reclining mother breasts / emptying at your smallest / cry warm sweet too much” which dribbles “out the side of your mouth” so that “we wake each morning soaked / in my love your only food” (39). Unrau correlates maternal nurturing with sustenance, much like Holbrook’s observation that “Mother is really just food” (Holbrook 9).

In the final section, Unrau revisits the concept of the “unborn,” but this time she transforms it from its original mournful association into an affirmation of the continued bodily connection she feels with her now-three year old son: “at three years i can hold / the whole curve of your belly / in my hand cup your calf in my palm” (Unrau 41). Rather than her own empty belly, she is now able to encompass with one hand the surface of the belly of the child she grew within her own body. When her child cries for her at night, she offers the comfort of her own tired body: “nightly you cry for me / i lay out my sleepy flesh your hand / finds its place on my bare shoulder” (41). This physical contact between mother and child provides reassurance and nurturance, even as the child grows. The timelessness of maternal love is reinforced once again in the concluding scene, and the sadness of pregnancy loss is replaced by love and care: “whatever we are during the day we are both / unborn in this liquid room” (41). The reference to being “unborn” conjures the lost pregnancies from before, and the liquidity of the room mirrors the amniotic fluid in which the fetus floats, but now the mother and child are captured together in an embrace that is as elemental as it is eternal.

Unrau’s “another birth story” is an apt final poem to examine in this chapter, as it explicitly meditates on the power and liberatory potential of the maternal body. It correlates the experience of giving birth to children with giving birth to oneself, a renewal of autonomy and bodily awakening. Like Irigaray’s approach to the body, Unrau subverts corporeal essentialism,

arguing that the path to women's freedom is not through a denial of the body, with its procreative potential, but rather an embrace of the power contained therein. The poem opens with an epigraph from Adrienne Rich's 1978 *The Dream of a Common Language*, "*I am a woman giving birth to myself*" (Unrau 42). This reframing of birth-giving acknowledges the power of the ability to give life, and uses the analogy to assert women's autonomy and self-awareness. Unrau begins, "i am eighteen hours long / i like to feel me / open sharp and terrible" (42). She is in control of the transformation that is taking place, asserting that she commands the process: "i give the word: / a death / a birth" (42). She celebrates the pleasure she takes in feeling herself, not as closed softness or joy, but as "open sharp and terrible," ferocious and fearless. She asserts her power over life and death, in her ability to "give the word" one way or the other—she is in control. In the next verse the birth of her son is rendered in oppositional terms; instead of requiring pain and effort, "his body passes through / viscous like cool / jelly in the throat" (42). Her son arrives, "first a cry / then i send the placenta / fold myself in" (42). Her passive "sending" of the placenta is in contrast to typical birth poetry, arguably because here she is introducing a different kind of birth, and the physical birthing of children is easy in comparison with the much more difficult and arduous self-birth that follows in the proceeding poems.

Another lyric enacts a literal speaking through the body, personifying the womb itself as capable of speech. Unrau writes,

> i withhold my eggs
>
> all the months of breastfeeding
>
> make pronouncements
>
> by milk and cyprin[112]

---

[112] "Cyprin" does not exist in the *OED*. Susan Holbrook explains, in an interview with Heather Milne, that "the French word *cyprine*… means female sexual secretions and, tellingly, has no equivalent in English" (Eichhorn and

by red eczema blooms

on her hands (46)

The extent to which the uterus controls or dictates the mother's bodily experiences, such as suppressing menstruation and causing itchy skin, grows as the lines of the poem unfold: "after the weaning i flare / inside her so she believes / she cannot contain me" (46). Unrau establishes a confrontational and conflictual relationship between the woman and the womb within her, with her reproductive organs taking precedence over the mother's will and control. Finally, the uterus returns to its regular monthly menstrual cycle, declaring its synchronicity with the moon and its continued capacity to control the subjectivity which supposedly contains it: "then i draw her back / to the rhythm i keep with the moon" (46).

In the aftermath of motherhood, Unrau declares that there is one more birth that is required, that of herself, and wonders if she has the fortitude for this final, painful reckoning: "today we who have birthed / twice with no drugs / curl on the bed" as she finds herself waiting and enduring "the ache of / one failed egg at my centre" (48). The one failed egg at her centre is her selfhood, and she asks, "can she bear it / the pain it takes / to deliver herself?" (48). Her selfhood and self-understanding is rooted within the body and its effluence, as two poems later, she writes of her menstruation:

splash of blood

in the bowl

all that red

language

---

Milne 44). It is likely that Unrau is employing the same neologism here. Furthermore, Cathy Paul cites the term's omission from English dictionaries as evidence of women's "alienat[ion] from our own bodily processes" and quotes Sysanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, "who proposes 'cyprin' as the English equivalent of the French 'cyprine'" which has a "long tradition in the French language" and has been recently reclaimed by feminists (Paul 11).

flushed away

before she has

a chance to read it (50)

Unrau interprets her body's menstrual blood as a source of knowledge, as "language" that can be read, but which is treated as waste and discarded before she has the opportunity to find its meaning. In order to decipher its code, she shifts back into the didacticism of italics she employed in previous poems to reflect on psychoanalytical and academic paradigms, but now, transforms it into what is necessary for her own self-knowledge, distilling it down into only "*what's essential",* which she explains is the necessity to *"write your own theory," "use the tools at your disposal"* which are *"an apple a pudding a brush a pen"* then use them to "*find your centre and push off*" (51). Her insistence on writing her own theory and using the tools at her disposal—everyday, ordinary objects—expresses an intellectual approach that is rooted in the material and experiential, where she can trust her own senses and her own mind for making meaning of her own life and understanding herself. In the final poem in the series, she writes of the empowerment she feels in claiming her own self-birth, "giving birth / she touched her power," which has its own materiality, as she "felt it buzz / like a raw nerve" (52). Here, there is a correlation between the birth-giving of her children as a source of strength and understanding—she discovers her power and its electrical potency—and her own personal birth into self-awareness and self-knowledge. She finds strength within to care for her children *and* to claim her autonomy and selfhood: "she knows she is fierce / not only for her children: / *i am a woman giving birth to myself*" (52).

**Conclusion: Empowered Maternal Corporeality**

The maternal body has been and remains a powerful symbol in the cultural imagination. From the historical, psychoanalytical and social prohibitions around the corporeality of the mother to more recent, feminist re-appropriations and explorations of the maternal body, the physical and physiological realities of conception, pregnancy, birth and lactation continue to be a potent and radical source of (pro)creative expression. The enduring taboo around the realities of the birthing and lactating body has been confronted and refuted with increasing frequency in the cultural imagination, as evidenced in the proliferation of maternally and corporeally themed poetry in the last decade. But fearless literary expressions of the maternal body date back to the 1940s, as evidenced by Livesay's pioneering lyric poetry, forming part of a rich matrilineal tradition in Canadian literature. Considered together, the eight poets whose work I have explored and examined in this chapter find within the materiality and experientiality of the maternal body a source of personal and feminist empowerment. In reclaiming and articulating their bodily experiences of motherhood, the poets actively resist and refuse patriarchal essentialisms and the long-standing silencing of the maternal. The myriad expressions of the eight poets reveal the variety and multiplicity of maternal experience and affect as refracted through the bodily experiences of pregnancy, birth-giving and lactation. There are recurrent references to fluidity and water (taking various forms in imagery of bathtubs, oceans, fish and ships), which conjure in turn amniotic fluid, lochia and breastmilk. This particular, fluid conjuring of the maternal is aligned with Grosz's theorization "that women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage" (203) and that women "are represented and live themselves as… liquidity" (203).

Livesay's birth-poetry is possibly the earliest of its kind in Canadian literature, in its detailed (albeit metaphoric) and sustained engagement with the experience of the pain and bodily

difficulty of childbirth. Even though she engages more heavily with natural symbolism and metaphor than her literary successors, considering its pre-second-wave time of publication, it remains ground-breaking in both its subject-matter and its maternal perspective. With the advent of feminism's second-wave, Marlatt's meditations on her own experiences of new motherhood in the late 1960s (published as *Rings* in 1971 and again with contemporaneous journals in 1980 as part of *What Matters*) is less surprising but no less radical, and she engages with the maternal experiences of childbirth and breastfeeding in explicit and visceral detail, highlighting the fluidity inherent to maternal corporeality. Into the 1980s, Tostevin's imagistic contemplation of the interiority of the maternal body during pregnancy makes visible and tangible that which is normally obscured and opaque. Her poems enact a transgressive inversion of the maternal body so that its interiority is revealed, and this slippage between boundaries of inside and outside is also mirrored in the fluid bilingual poetics between French and English, all of which conjures the disruptive potentialities of female corporeality due its "indeterminacy of body boundaries" (Shildrick 34). In the 1990s, Brandt explores both the frustrations and the pleasures of pregnancy and motherhood, in much the same rich, unflinching detail as Marlatt twenty years earlier, and with the same attention to liquidity through metaphors of ships and water. The twenty-first century then witnesses a remarkable proliferation of maternally-themed poetry, the most extensive collection of which is Croll's *Blood Mother*, wherein she carefully elaborates her bodily experiences of motherhood, including the conception, pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding of her two children, with recurring images of skin, blood, and breastmilk. With a more concentrated focus on lactation, Holbrook uses the alternation of left and right breasts during nursing as a formal poetic structure as a means to capture and organize her own maternal thinking, finding joy and creative inspiration within the physical demands of mothering. Tsiang

explicitly engages with essentialist expectations of motherhood, challenging and subverting them in order to find within her body a source of strength and liberation. Finally, Unrau's corporeal poems pull the curtain back even further on embodied motherhood in confronting and exposing the painful spectre of pregnancy loss, chronicling in visceral detail her experiences with miscarriage. This sorrow is followed by the joys of birthing and nursing her two children, but the earlier poems of loss mark an even more radical descent into the common and yet still largely unspoken suffering of mothers whose pregnancies do not result in a much-desired child.

Ultimately, the eight mother-poets whose work engages with the corporeal aspects of motherhood represent a powerful, feminist re-appropriation of the maternal body. Their raw, visceral and honest depictions of the blood, milk and tears that characterize birth-giving and caring for a young infant are a refusal of patriarchal conceptions of the essentialized, idealized and beneficent mother figure that continues to dominate Western socio-cultural discourse. Their mothers are, in contrast, ones who bleed and lactate, who express anger and frustration and dismay, and who also find within their bodies a source of empowerment and self-knowledge. They transform the lived materiality and liquidity of the body into textuality and discourse, enacting what Irigaray exhorted women to do through the use of a new, revolutionary use of language, one that functioned to "[t]urn everything upside down, inside out, back to front" (*Speculum* 142). This new women's language would confront "those *blanks* in discourse which recall the places of her exclusion" and instead, "[r]einscribe them hither and thither as *divergences…* in *ellipses* and *eclipses* that deconstruct the logical grid of the reader-writer" (142, italics in original). This finds a particularly unique forum in poetry, an exploding of language which pushes boundaries, and opens a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations. Poetry is thus particularly adept at conforming to Irigaray's revolutionary impulse, which sought to

"*[o]verthrow syntax* by suspending its eternally teleological order, by snipping the wires, cutting the current, breaking the circuits, switching the connections, by modifying continuity, alternation, frequency, intensity" (142, italics in original). By writing about, through and with the maternal body, transforming the lived corporeality of mothers into text, these eight Canadian poets affirm the vitality, presence and liberatory possibilities of the mother. And as mothers who translate their bodily experiences into textual discourse, the poets all manage to—as Cixous insisted they must—write their bodies into being. It also marks part of a trajectory I have traced inward over the course of this dissertation, from an absence or impossibility of the mother-writer, supposedly cast out from literary representation, to an emergent possibility through spatiality and textual presence, to an intimate and often visceral contemplation of the materiality and corporeality of the body, and in the next chapter, delving even further within to explore maternal consciousness and subjectivity.

# Chapter Four

## Matrifocality, Maternal Consciousness and the Radical Subjectivity of the Mother-Artist

To a certain extent, all of the texts considered thus far can be interpreted as discursive and literary examples of maternal consciousness and subjectivity. Even among the mother-writers who felt their positionality as an impossibility, and those who sought out space for their work and incorporated autobiography-inflected mother-writers into their texts, and those who meditated on the corporeal aspects of pregnancy, birth and motherhood, all were—in their ways—taking on the subjectivity and perspective of a mother and a writer simultaneously. What sets the texts in this final chapter apart, however, is the degree to which the identity and experience of mothering takes on a central role in the text. It is not just a matter of a text which makes space for the mother, or allows for the possibility of a maternal consciousness, or asserts the presence of the maternal body, but texts which are matrifocal in nature, in which the mother-writer, and her experiences of mothering, are the key defining features. Andrea O'Reilly defines "[a] matrifocal narrative" as "one in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated and valued, and is structurally central to the plot" (O'Reilly *Matricentric* 5-6). The proliferation of matrifocal texts in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries also marks a transition into the interiority and psychology of the mother in a sustained and complex way. More than simply allowing the mother-writer to exist and have a presence within the text, now the mother herself, her thoughts, emotions, experiences, struggles, joys and relationship(s) to her child(ren) take full prominence in the poem, short story, or novel. Her consciousness, interiority and subjectivity become a central and integral feature.

As in previous chapters, the texts I consider here capture a relatively broad timeframe in Canadian literary history, from Atwood's short story "Giving Birth" (1977) and Nicole Brossard's *These Our Mothers* (1977; translated into English in 1983), to Claire Harris's poetry collection *Drawing Down a Daughter* in 1992, Fiona Tinwei Lam's *Enter the Chrysanthemum* in 2009, and finally, Ann-Marie Macdonald's largely autobiographical novel *Adult Onset* in 2014. Each of these texts work to explode the silence that has traditionally surrounded motherhood, revealing the complexity and intensity of maternal subjectivity, from feelings of ambivalence, fear and anger to passionate joy and pleasure. Far from the impossibility of combining motherhood and creativity, these mother-writers use their maternal experience to inform, inspire and form the foundational content of their literary works. Motherhood is not a barrier to their artistic expression, it is more than a role among many that form a part of the text, and it is deeper and more integral than embodied or corporeal motherhood; in these matrifocal texts, the mother's interiority, her intellectual and emotional landscape, are laid bare. Rather than impeding the artistic impulse, maternity is generative of literary creativity, and a source of personal and discursive empowerment.

**Feminist Theorizations of Maternal Subjectivities**

From the 1970s to the present, a considerable amount of feminist scholarship has emerged that addresses this burgeoning interest in the subjectivity of the mother, maternal experience and maternal consciousness. Feminist philosophers and theorists have sought to elaborate previously unarticulated and unexplored realms of maternal subjectivity, from recovering and resurrecting the mother within psychoanalytic paradigms to understanding ways in which maternal practice gives rise to particular ethical forms of being and functioning in the

world. Beyond Adrienne Rich's foundational *Of Woman Born* (1976), whose theories I have elaborated more fully in earlier chapters, Nancy Chodorow was among the first, in 1978, to attempt a psychoanalytical analysis of motherhood through an elucidation of the maternal psyche within the Freudian, oedipal family structure. Chodorow argues against biological determinism, revealing instead that women are psychologically moulded from a young age to take on a maternal role in the family, a form of social conditioning that is reinforced and perpetuated by societal structures of Western, industrial capitalism. Chodorow asserts "that the contemporary reproduction of mothering occurs through social structurally induced psychological processes" that "is neither a product of biology nor of intentional role training" but rather a part of "female… personality development" (7). She argues that "Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself. By contrast, women as mothers (and men as not-mothers) produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed" (Chodorow 7). It is in this way "that women's mothering reproduces itself cyclically" (7). However, despite this social conditioning, Chodorow does not diminish the significance of motherhood in women's lives, observing that "women get gratification from and fulfill maternal role expectations at a fundamentally different level of experience from that of any other human relationship. Mothering requires and elicits relational capacities which are unique" (85). Anticipating the work of Sara Ruddick, Daphne de Marneffe and Mielle Chandler which follows ten to twenty years later, Chodorow notes that "the mother-infant relationship provides gratification to mother as well as infant" and that "good-enough

mothering is done through empathy, primary identification, and experiencing the infant as continuous with the self and not separate" (85).[113]

Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989) seeks to elucidate the unique, powerful and relational modes of maternal subjectivity, and extrapolate them into an anti-militarist ethics. Like Chodorow, she resists biological essentialism by revealing the roots of maternal consciousness or "thinking" in the active, daily work that mothers undertake in caring for their children. Rather than theorizing that maternal subjectivity is foundationally inherent or developmentally determined, Ruddick identifies three key necessities or "demands" children make by their very existence, the responses mothers then undertake to meet them, and the thinking that evolves from this activity. Most basically, Ruddick asserts that "[m]aternal practice begins in a response to the reality of a biological child in a particular social world" (17) and that each child "'demand[s]' that their lives be preserved and their growth fostered" and "the primary social groups with which a mother is identified… demand that she raise her children in a manner acceptable to them" (17). As such, "[t]hese three demands—for *preservation, growth*, and *social acceptability*—constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training" (Ruddick 17). This maternal work, in turn, gives rise to particular forms of subjectivity or, as Ruddick phrases it, "Maternal work itself demands that mothers think" (24). This maternal thinking is defined by "the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgments she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she

[113] It must be noted that Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering*, in addition to providing a psychoanalytical approach to maternal experience and subjectivity, is ultimately a feminist text, in that she seeks—as Beauvoir, Freidan and Rich did before her—to relieve women's oppression within patriarchy. She notes that "[t]he sexual division of labor and women's responsibility for child care are linked to and generate male dominance" (214), and that "[a]ny strategy for change whose goal includes liberation from the constraints of an unequal social organization of gender must take account of the need for a fundamental reorganization of parenting, so that primary parenting is shared between men and women" (215).

assumes, [and] the values she affirms" (24). Ruddick acknowledges that while the demand to preserve children's lives "is the central constitutive, invariant aim of maternal practice" (19), there are wide variations across time, culture and geography in terms of what it means to facilitate growth and meet expectations for social acceptability. She notes that the "demand to foster children's growth appears to be historically and culturally specific" (19) and that "[w]hat counts as [socially] acceptable varies enormously within and among groups and cultures" (21).[114]

Cognitively speaking, mothers cultivate a "capacity for double focus, an ability to think about last as well as first things… to take the near and banal quite seriously. A tooth has to be filled, a meal prepared, homework finished, a fight stopped. Everyday events are immediately and ineluctably demanding. Time is short, tasks are specific, deadlines fixed, time for musing nonexistent" (78). However, Ruddick also argues that motherhood is inherently expansive for a mother's intellect, noting that "[w]hatever mix of happiness and sorrow it brings, a commitment to fostering growth expands a mother's intellectual life" (89) due to the fact that "children are fascinating" and "in favorable circumstances [a mother's] children's lively intellects rekindle her own" (89). Mothers must also become uniquely adaptable to the transformations that growth brings, necessitating an ability to both "hold close and welcome change" (89). In fact, the ability

[114] Notwithstanding the difficulties in generalizing and theorizing this multiplicity of maternal identities and subjectivities, Ruddick arrives at a series of conclusions about shared maternal experiences, noting the "passionate love" that characterizes mothers' relationships to their children, a "love that is not destroyed by the ambivalence and anger it includes" (29). She highlights the "sense of maternal competence" that usually develops, the social rewards mothers receive in terms of the approval, pride and gratitude of partners and family members, the unique control they are able to exert over the daily details of their maternal work, a feeling of belonging among a community of other mothers, and "a sense of well being" whenever "their children flourish" (29-30). However, Ruddick also acknowledges that mothers rarely "take an easy pleasure in their own competence" and that "no children flourish all of the time" and that when children are physically sick or emotionally distressed—as inevitably happens—mothers are beset by "a sense of helplessness and guilt" (30). Furthermore, motherhood is fraught with emotional temptations towards "possessiveness, parochialism, fearfulness, cheery denial, high-mindedness, self-righteousness, self-sacrifice, and a rage for order that frightens even mothers themselves" (30).

to accommodate and meet the needs of a perpetually changing child is central to maternal consciousness: "This welcoming attitude, comparable to the humility of preservative love, is the most exigent intellectual demand on those who foster growth" (89).

However, this necessary malleability and social construction of the self is something that mothers also recognize in their daily lives, as they "often suffer from a sense of fragmentation as they experience, within and between their homes and more public places, rapid shifts of power and powerlessness, recognition and invisibility, nearly awesome love and routine contempt" (92). Ruddick relates this to the widely-held belief "that women have a cognitive style distinctly more concrete than men's. Women have been said to value open over closed structures, to eschew the clear-cut and unambiguous, to refuse sharp divisions between self and other or outer world and inner experience" (95). She gestures towards the more familiar terminology used to describe "women's thinking," such as "holistic," "field-dependent," and "open-ended" (95) and further argues that "[a]lthough women are able to reason abstractly, they tend to reject the demands of abstraction and instead look closely, invent options, refuse closure" (95-96). Ultimately, Ruddick connects these modes of "women's thinking" to a specifically maternal subjectivity, noting that "[i]f concrete cognition does indeed make up one strand of the suppressed and developing different voices attributed to women, we might look to women's maternal work as a partial explanation of this epistemological predilection" (96).

Motherhood continues to be "contested terrain in the 1990s" as, "[i]n fact, it has always been contested terrain" (Glenn 2). Just as theorists of the third-wave attempt to resist the hegemony of second-wave feminism, which has been critiqued for being too narrowly white and middle-class, maternal theorists also seek to acknowledge the diversity and multiplicity of maternal experience while complicating dominant conceptions of motherhood. Evelyn Nakano

Glenn highlights the extent to which women's mothering is socially, culturally and materially constructed, while also acknowledging that "for most of the twentieth century an idealized model of motherhood, derived from the situation of the white, American, middle class, has been projected as universal" (3). However, Glenn outlines emergent discourses that resist the hegemony of ideologies that originate in the biases of the white middle class, noting that "As Third World women, women of color [sic], lesbians, and working-class women began to challenge dominant European and American conceptions of womanhood, and to insist that differences among women were as important as commonalities, they have brought alternative constructions of mothering into the spotlight" (3).[115]

Sharon Hays's *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996) employs a sociological and historical approach to our contemporary ideologies of motherhood, arguing like her predecessors that motherhood is socially and culturally constructed rather than essential or innate, and that in the late-twentieth century, the dominant ideal is that of "intensive mothering," which "is a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children" (Hays x). She also notes that this approach to child-rearing, as one that "requires not only large quantities of money but also professional-level skills and copious amounts of physical, moral, mental, and emotional energy on the part of the individual mother is a relatively recent historical phenomenon" (4). Implicit in the ideology of intensive mothering is the belief in the innocence and pricelessness of children, that mothers are best suited to raise them, and that this raising "should be centred on children's needs, with

[115] As I note in Chapter Two, with my consideration of Jeannette Armstrong's *Whispering in Shadows*, Indigenous motherhood draws on a cultural legacy of maternal empowerment that is distinct from the dominant, Western hegemony of patriarchal motherhood. Black motherhood is, likewise, informed by a Black cultural legacy that evolved in response to the dehumanizing experience of racism, and that venerates maternal experience as a wellspring of strength and affirmation, all of which I explore in greater detail later in this chapter in my analysis of Clare Harris's *Drawing Down a Daughter*.

methods that are informed by experts, labor-intensive and costly" (21). Among the consequences of this dominant ideology is the reality that "stay-at-home mothers are burdened with a socially devalued and potentially isolating position at home, while employed women are saddled with a 'second shift' of domestic chores and child-rearing duties and are hindered in their attempts at career advancement" (18). Furthermore, Hays identifies the ideology of intensive mothering as one which serves not only patriarchy, but also capitalism and the modern nation-state (18).[116] Hays further acknowledges that "[e]very mother's ideas about mothering are shaped by a complex map of her class position, race, ethnic heritage, religious background, political beliefs, sexual preferences, physical abilities or disabilities, citizenship status, participation in various subcultures, place of residence, workplace environment, formal education, the techniques her own parents used to raise her—and more" (76).

On the cusp of the twenty-first century, Susan Maushart's *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't* (1999) observes that "our deeply confused notions about motherhood are engendering a tidal wave of guilt, resentment, and anxiety among today's women" (xx). Maushart identifies the roots of the "mask of motherhood" as an attempt at self-control, as "[t]o a very considerable degree, what we call self-control depends on our ability to 'mask,' to deny and repress what we experience, to misrepresent it, even to ourselves" (1-2). She defines the "mask of motherhood" as "a repertoire of socially constructed representations" or "an assemblage of fronts—mostly brave, serene, and

[116] Hays writes that intensive mothering "frees men from having to do the grunt work of looking after the dirty, demanding, dependent beings that are their progeny" and the fact that women are "responsible for all household chores means that men are often supplied with personal maids, chefs, and laundresses" (163). Also, intensive mothering often means that "men are spared from women's competition in the labor market" and "even when women do work for pay, their identification with domesticity means that they tend to be segregated in those poorly paid occupations dubbed 'women's work'" (163). In other instances, "employed women work so hard at home and feel so responsible for the kids and so guilty about the hours they spend away that they do not have the time or the energy to compete with men for the more lucrative positions in the higher rungs of the career ladder" (163).

all-knowing—that we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experience" (Maushart 2). She warns that even though "the mask of motherhood is a useful coping mechanism" it is one that is particularly dangerous for women, as it has the potential to "become so convincing that we fool even ourselves" and in doing so, "we divest ourselves of authenticity and integrity… diminish our knowledge, our power, our spirit as women" (5-6).

Maushart notes that while "it is true to say that the mask of motherhood has been forged on the anvil of patriarchy, it is no man-made delusion" (23). Women have made the masks that they wear, and so must bear responsibility, however, because of this self-generated deception, women are also empowered with the possibility of unmaking and removing the mask of motherhood (23). The primary literary texts in this chapter are each an example of this particular form of unmasking, where the authors unveil the affective, intellectual and material conflicts and complexities of maternal life. Maternal narrative is a way for mother-writers to recover the very authenticity, integrity, knowledge, power and spirit as women that Maushart suggests are essential. While it may be undoubtedly true that, as Maushart argues, one of the "paradoxes of human motherhood" is the fact "that mothering is the most powerful of all biological capacities, and among the most disempowering of all social experiences" (22), I argue in this chapter and indeed in my dissertation as a whole that literature provides an important and impactful avenue with which mothers can remove the masks which limit and enclose them, and discover the possibilities, opportunities, empowerment and authentic beauty in their own experiences of mothering their children.

Daphne de Marneffe acknowledges and celebrates the immensely gratifying and deeply felt desire to mother one's children in her 2004 text, *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life*. Rather than interpreting maternal experience through the lens of social obligation,

biological imperative or familial duty, de Marneffe argues that mothers feel a "longing… to nurture [their] children; the wish to participate in their mutual relationship; and the choice, insofar as it is possible, to put that desire into practice" (9). She insists that women experience an "authentic desire" to mother their children, "a desire not derived from a child's need, though responsive to it; a desire not created by a social role, though potentially supported by it; rather, a desire anchored in her experience of herself as an agent, an autonomous individual, a person" (10). Indeed, in Canada and in contemporary Western societies generally, where birth control and abortion are widely available, most mothers have actively *chosen* to have their children, and de Marneffe highlights the extent to which the desire to mother is just as authentic, autonomous and empowering a choice as any other.[117]

De Marneffe argues that motherhood connects women with that which makes us most fundamentally human, arguing that a mother's interactions with her growing children over time "put[s] us in touch with our own embodied emotional life in a new way, weaving in memory and empathy" and "involves our whole selves, integrating multiple levels of our conscious and unconscious experience—physical, verbal, and emotional" (82). This rich "trove of shared experience" between mothers and their children gives rise to moments of transcendence in their exchanges, which de Marneffe likens to "glimpses of 'the center'" which "occur when the unconscious awareness of oneness is apprehended by the conscious mind" and "this enriching, deepening, and rendering more resonant the acts and moments of lived experience, is what

[117] De Marneffe does not minimize the systemic barriers mothers continue to face, but rather notes that women "recognize the impediments to earning power and professional accomplishment that caring for children presents, but the problem remains that caring for their children *matters* deeply to them" (*Maternal* 16). She presents motherhood as an utterly transformative experience, one that requires that "[w]e accept and desire a relationship defined by *responding, being affected, being needed,* and *enabling the other to come into him- or herself*" (17-18) and that in doing so, "[w]e relinquish control, we are touched, we change" (18). Motherhood requires adjustments to a woman's most fundamental self-understanding, ushering in "a transformed individuality, an integration of a new relationship and a new role into one's sense of self" (20).

religious ritual, myth, and poetry are designed to do" (83). In interacting with one's children, mothers "participate in a way of being in the world where body, emotion, imagination, and memory fluidly communicate" (83).

De Marneffe thus presents an interesting conceptualization of motherhood as something akin to an artist's vocation, observing that "[m]othering is one of many kinds of work perceived as meaningful by its practitioners even when society doesn't reward the vocation handsomely. Artists are rarely well paid, but continue to make art because it has intrinsic value" (31). This similarity between artistic practice and the sustained act of mothering is also equally as important and integral to one's sense of self, as "[l]ike the artist or the poet, a mother can feel she is not truly living her life or being herself if she feels deprived of the time and emotional space to relate to her child" (44). De Marneffe's text is among the first to affirm women's conscious, deeply felt and autonomous choice to mother their own children, despite the difficulties and conflicts it engenders. She presents mothering as something that is profoundly important to women, that it is something women desire deeply, and that this desire is arguably one of the most powerful reasons women juggle and negotiate and endure the conflicts and contradictions it brings to their lives. De Marneffe clarifies the stakes of her feminism as follows: "The question my feminism asks is not how to free mothers to go to work or how to free them to care for their children; it is how mothers can grapple with the demand for self-dividedness, an issue inherent in our structures of work and embedded in our neoliberal 'ideals' about the autonomous self in capitalist society" (46).

The prolific maternal scholarship of Andrea O'Reilly in the early twenty-first century theorizes and explores the history and contemporary practices of feminist and empowered mothering. In the introduction to her 2004 edited collection, *From Motherhood to Mothering:*

*The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born,* O'Reilly articulates "[a] feminist counternarrative of motherhood" that "is concerned with imagining and implementing a view of mothering that is *empowering* to women as opposed to oppressive" ("Introduction" 10). Whether referred to as "authentic, radical, feminist, or gynocentric mothering, this mode of mothering… empahsiz[es] maternal power and ascrib[es] agency to mothers and value to motherwork" (10). Mothering is thus "a socially engaged practice that seeks to effect cultural change in the home through feminist child rearing and the world at-large through political/social activism" (10). In *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (2004), O'Reilly further argues that "empowered mothering—in affirming maternal agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity—makes motherhood more rewarding, fulfilling and satisfying for women" (26). In addition, empowered mothering "allows women selfhood outside of motherhood and affords them power within motherhood. As well… the ability to combine motherhood with work (paid employment and/or activism), and limiting the time, energy, and money spent on children relieves women of much of the isolation, dependency, boredom, and exhaustion experienced in patriarchal motherhood" (26).

Manifestations of empowered mothering[118] can take a variety of forms, whether it is through employment outside the home, insisting on greater involvement of fathers in day-to-day childcare, activism, mothers taking time to meet their own needs, cultivating more communal modes of child-rearing, or acknowledging the multiplicity of maternal affects beyond idealized feelings of love (17-18). Even so, O'Reilly acknowledges the pernicious ubiquity of patriarchal motherhood, noting that "while we may seek to mother against, outside, or beyond motherhood,

[118] While I am using the terms interchangeably, O'Reilly distinguishes between feminist and empowered mothering. She defines "empowered mothering" as that which "signifies a general resistance to patriarchal motherhood while feminist mothering refers to a particular style of empowered mothering in which this resistance is developed from and expressed through a feminist identification or consciousness" (*Rocking* 17).

mothering can never fully free itself… In other words, even as we resist motherhood, it contains mothering. Despite our struggle to be otherwise, even the most resistant mothers find themselves, at times, restrained in and by the institution of motherhood. Indeed, even to imagine a mothering apart from motherhood may be impossible" (23). Certainly, the maternal texts that I explore in detail throughout this dissertation attest to the inescapability of dominant, patriarchal ideologies of motherhood which have centuries of intergenerational experience and tradition behind them. The authors each grapple with the expectations they feel in their mothering, and their frequent failure to live up to the ideal mother they believe they should be.[119] However, in resisting and refusing the oppressive ideals of intensive motherhood, feminist or empowered mothers "call into question the belief that mothering requires excessive time, money, and energy, and thus practice a mode of mothering that is more compatible with paid employment" (47) and they "look to friends, family and their partners to assist with childcare" (46). In addition, "empowered mothers see the development of a mother's selfhood as beneficial to mothering and not antithetical to it" (47). As a consequence, "empowered mothers do not always put their

[119] O'Reilly also examines the various ideological iterations of the 'ideal mother' that have dominated over the past two or three generations. According to O'Reilly, "Sacrificial motherhood… emerged as the dominant view of good mothering in the post-war period, or approximately 60 years ago. Sacrificial motherhood is characterized by three central themes, that mothering comes *naturally* to women, that the mother should be the primary caretaker and that children need full-time mothering (*Rocking* 38-39). These three central tenets take on a series of variations as sociocultural realities evolve through the latter half of the twentieth century with the advent of second-wave feminism. For example, "[t]he post-war discourse of good motherhood" was one of custodial mothering, which "demanded that mothers be home full-time with their children," a view that dominated "between 1946 to the mid-70s" (39), and required "the physical proximity of mother and child" however there was minimal expectation that the mother should "be continually attuned to the psychological, emotional or cognitive needs of her children" (40). From the 1980s onward, however, the ideology of "intensive mothering" comes to dominate maternal ideals, an ideology which posits that children can only be adequately nurtured by their biological mother, that this nurturing must be round-the-clock, that the mother's needs always come second to her children's, that mothers should defer to experts for parenting advice, that motherhood is a source of satisfaction and fulfilment and finally, that children require inordinate amounts of time, energy and money (43). O'Reilly is also adamant that "the ideology of intensive mothering emerged in the 1980s in response to changing demographics of motherhood" (42) and that it "functions as a backlash discourse, and, like all backlash discourses, it functions to regulate women" (43).

children's needs before their own nor do they only look to motherhood to define and realize their identity. Rather, their selfhood is fulfilled and expressed in various ways: work, activism, friendships, relationships, hobbies, and motherhood" (47).

More directly related to my theoretical project here, O'Reilly also highlights the importance of "recover[ing]… the maternal voice," as it "has been silenced, disguised and marginalized" (*Mother* 257). In particular, she explains that one of the "central aim[s] of motherhood studies is to articulate and theorize 'the voice of the mother'—that is, to analyze becoming and being a mother from the perspective and subjectivity of mothers themselves" (O'Reilly *Matricentric* 5). One of the key ways in which this maternal voice finds expression in literature is through "matrifocal narrative," which O'Reilly defines as a genre of maternal writing wherein the mother is culturally or socially empowered, and her maternity is of thematic and narrative significance (5-6). The literary texts I study in this chapter are all distinguished by their matrifocality—motherhood plays a foundational thematic and narrative role, and they are centred within the experience, subjectivity and consciousness of the mother. Maternal writing "interrupts and deconstructs the normative script of maternity as private and silent, and also disturbs and counters the received narrative of creativity, specifically the liberal humanist view of subjectivity and authorship" (O'Reilly "Introduction" 16). Furthermore, O'Reilly correlates mothering with writing, noting that both are "based on relationality, reciprocity, and mutuality" (16). And unlike prevailing idealizations of the artist figure that I explore in Chapter One, that position motherhood and creativity as antithetical, O'Reilly argues that "Mothering… may be understood as not only 'compatible' with art but more significantly as *conducive* to it; and this perspective, in turn, constitutes a 'strategy of subversion,' an undoing of the hegemonic constructions of both mothering and writing" (17).

**Literary Mothers and the Emergence of Maternal Discourse**

According to Sara Ruddick, mothers are natural story-tellers. In conversing with their children, and narrating their lives to them, recounting memories from when they were babies and before they could remember, "mothers share and elaborate their observations, making a coherent, often amusing, dramatic, or poignant story of their children's particularities" (Ruddick 98). These maternal narratives "establish continuities in [mothers'] ongoing nurturing activities," "remind [children] of reassuring continuities" and "connect their understandings of a shared experience" (98). Maternal stories are also powerful, as "[c]hildren are shaped by—some would say imprisoned in—the stories they are first told" (98). However, generally speaking, "[t]he principal virtues of maternal stories are *realism, compassion,* and *delight*" (98), qualities that mothers "more or less consciously recognize" when cultivating positive maternal narratives for their children (101). Ruddick suggests that these narratives are also a shared project, as "mothers and children, through editing and inventing, tell stories they can live with" (98). Ruddick concludes hopefully that "[c]hildren who learn about themselves through compassionate stories may develop a maternal generosity toward their lives, learning from their mothers the capacity to appreciate the complex humanness of their plight, to forgive themselves as they have been forgiven" (100). Of course, the narratives that I am considering here are not those carefully honed and loving narratives that mothers tell their children about themselves and their families of origin, but it is interesting that this particular activity of narrativization is understood as inherent to nurturant, maternal care. That mothers are already telling stories in their daily interactions with their children is an important quality that refuses, most foundationally, the binary between motherhood and creativity. Mothers are already creators and storytellers, even if they may not be

cognizant of it in literary terms, and have within them this relational, compositional, narrative capacity.

While Ruddick clearly did not have literary writers in mind with this particular theorization of maternal narrative, contemporaneous with and in the years that followed the publication of *Maternal Thinking*, numerous scholars and critics began to explore the figure of the mother-writer, and the cultivation of maternal perspectives in literature. In 1989, the same year Ruddick's text appeared, Marianne Hirsch published *The Mother Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Hirsch "takes as [a] point of departure the intersection of familial structures and structures of plotting, attempting to place at the center of inquiry mothers and daughters, the female figures neglected by psychoanalytic theories and submerged in traditional plot structures" (Hirsch 3). She focuses on nineteenth and twentieth century novels from Western Europe and North America, "reading them with psychoanalytic theories of subject-formation in the context of the narrative conventions of realism, modernism, and post-modernism" (3). And while Hirsch notes that women were successfully inscribed into male plots by silencing the maternal (4), there is also a concurrent trend that begins with Rich's *Of Woman Born* and "the many novels, poems, and essays which come to dominate the feminist writing of the period" wherein "the figure of the mother becomes an important object of exploration in relation to the birth of the feminist daughter" (130). Hirsch sees this discursive interest in the mother as a transitional moment towards eventually discovering, inhabiting and articulating a maternal subjectivity directly. But in the meantime, "[t]he feminist family romance, as it is voiced in the texts of psychoanalytic feminism, is the romance of the daughter, entangled with her mother through identification and the struggle against it" (138). What must happen, according to Hirsch, is "a probing scrutiny of what separates feminist discourse from maternal discourse" and only

then can feminist thinking be freed "to define some of the shapes of maternal subjectivity and to study the articulation of specifically *maternal* voices" (163).

Over the thirty years since Hirsch's text was published, this has indisputably taken place, and the texts I study throughout this dissertation are evidence of this growing maternal presence, vocalization and understanding. Of the emergent maternal feminism that Hirsch imagines, she asserts that "maternal discourse is necessarily plural" and "is intimately tied to and tied up in social and political reality, as well as to biological and psychological structures" (196). She suggests that "[m]aternal knowledge… can enlarge a feminist analysis and reverse traditional conceptions of love and anger, of power and knowledge, of self in relation to other, of femininity and maturity, of sexuality and nurturance" (196). Most importantly, in studying the mother as subject, "a different conception of subjectivity might emerge" (197). In doing so, "we might try to envision a culturally variable, mutually affirming form of interconnection between one body and another, one person and another" (197).[120]

In the introduction to their essay collection of literary criticism, *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities* (1991), editors Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy note that "the women whose writing is analyzed in *Narrating Mothers* resist binary logic, particularly the injunction to either mother or write, in order to assert the value of *both* procreation *and* creation" (5). They assert that in insisting "upon a dialogic (both/and) rather than a monologic (either/or) subject, these mother/writers… simultaneously disrupt narratives that silence mothers and invent a different notion of character, or subjectivity" (5). Daly and Reddy also express a distrust of maternal theorizations that mobilize corporeality and psychoanalytic paradigms,

[120] Patrice DiQuinzio's *The Impossibility of Motherhood* (1999) and Mielle Chandler's "Emancipated Subjectivity and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices" (1998) present similar arguments related to the uniquely relational nature of maternal subjectivity.

noting that "[a]t present, the branch of feminist literary theory most directly concerned with the question of maternal language posits the mother's language as a nonverbal one limited to the preoedipal period, with some theorists going so far as to assert that the mother's bodily fluids are her language" (7). This appears to be a direct critique of Kristeva's concept of a maternal semiotic, Irigaray's corporeal feminism and Cixous's white ink, conceptualizations which Daly and Reddy reject, as they argue that "[i]f the only maternal language imaginable, or at least admissible, is a preoedipal, nonverbal one, then mothers are effectively silenced and barred from public discourse, a move that serves patriarchal control of mothers and of motherhood" (7). However, in contrast to this misguided characterization and silencing of maternal voices, Daly and Reddy observe that "[m]ost of these writers mother *and* write, as did many of their predecessors and as do many of their characters," and that despite being told for centuries that women must choose between these two undertakings, the academics and writers featured in *Narrating Mothers* recognize and reveal this dictate to be demonstrably false (8). Instead, the editors exhort their readers to "listen for maternal stories in postmodern plots where selfhood is constructed, or reconstructed, in more complex patterns" (12) and argue for the need for "more narratives of mothers' experiences of mothering and working and writing—activities not sharply divided…and we need to pay attention to those narratives" (18).

It appears critics and writers heeded this advice, as the ensuing years witness a proliferation of anthologies and collections in Canada and the United States dedicated to the theme of mothering and writing. In 1994, Maureen T. Reddy, Martha Roth and Amy Sheldon edited *Mother Journeys: Feminists Write About Mothering,* which features personal autobiographical essays, poetry and visual art by feminist scholars and writers about their experiences of motherhood. This is followed up in 1995 by Judith Pierce Rosenberg, who edits *A*

*Question of Balance: Artists and Writers on Motherhood,* a collection of articles and essays profiling prominent female American writers and visual artists who were also mothers. In 2001, Moyra Davey's anthology, *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood,* compiles an eclectic collection of essays, memoir and prose fiction on the subject of mothering in English, from the post-war era to the present. In Canada, Rishma Dunlop edited an anthology of poems about motherhood in 2007 entitled *White Ink: Poems on Mothers and Motherhood*, which was followed in 2008 by *Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood,* a collection of short non-fiction prose by mother-writers, edited by Shannon Cowan, Fiona Tinwei Lam and Cathy Stonehouse. And *The M Word: Conversations about Motherhood* (2014), edited by Kerry Clare, compiles personal essays on the theme of motherhood in its various iterations, from pregnancy, birth and mothering, to infertility and miscarriage. Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly likewise observe in 2010 that "[w]ithin the last few decades of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century, authors have been writing about maternal themes, identities, and experiences to a perhaps unprecedented degree" (5). Ruth Quiney concurs, noting that "[i]n the early twenty-first century, the subjective experience and personal politics of mothering have attained significant literary visibility" (Quiney 19). The maternally-themed texts I study in this final chapter certainly affirm the conclusions drawn by Quiney, Podnieks and O'Reilly, encompassing the later decades of the twentieth century to the present.

It is challenging to capture the similarities among this multiplicity of matrifocal texts. They each function as an articulation of maternal consciousness and subjectivity, and as such, resist any easy categorization. They reveal the complexity and ambiguity of maternal experience, inflected as it is by marital circumstances, socioeconomic class, race and sexuality. Each writer expresses her deeply felt love for her child(ren), her desire to raise and nurture them, and the

inevitable conflicts life regularly presents to this universal, maternal project. But the texts also explore the obstacles these mothers face, whether internal or external, to realizing their ideals of maternal care, and their range of emotional and affective responses. In all instances, though, the maternal voice is central to the text—the mother is no longer shrouded in oedipal silence and symbolism; she is fully present, articulate and vociferous. As Ruth Quiney argues, "maternal writers engage with the longstanding feminist fight to write the unspeakable, those abject discourses of (traditionally feminine) experience and emotion that transgress gendered and social norms" (20). In other words, "[m]aternal writers… have entered a longstanding debate about the right of female experience to be recognized as politically and culturally important. They are also struggling to delineate an active, expressive maternal subject in the contemporary West" (20). Quiney goes on to note that this "efflorescence of literature by women about maternal experience cannot but suggest an opening up, however contested, of access to public speech for maternal (non-)subjects" (22). In addition to the transformative capacity of maternal literature and subjectivity, the texts under consideration also firmly and unequivocally reject the false dichotomy between artist and mother, as they make motherhood the focal point of their work. In contrast to the texts I consider in Chapter Two, where characters who happen to be mothers and writers come into being and take up narrative space, here the mother is prominent, centripetal, and essential to the work itself. The mother is not only the main protagonist, but their work of mothering their children, their consciousness and desires as mothers, their experiences and the materiality of their maternal lives, comprise the main themes and components of their work.

**Projections, Doubles and Fragmentation: Maternal Consciousness in Margaret Atwood's "Giving Birth"**

Appearing as part of Atwood's first short story collection, *Dancing Girls* (1977), "Giving Birth" employs a frame narrative featuring an unnamed mother-writer who is, in turn, narrating the birth experience of her protagonist, Jeannie. This metafictional story creates a multilayered, fragmentary and occasionally sinister portrait of maternal consciousness, featuring erasures, evasions, projections, shadow-selves and doubles. At the time the story was written, Atwood herself was a new mother (she gave birth to her daughter just a year earlier in 1976) (Murray n.pag.), adding a third layer of biographical metafiction to the text. Like the other writers whose work I consider in this chapter, Atwood narrates "Giving Birth" from the perspective of the mother herself, inviting us into her subjectivity through the feelings, thoughts and experiences of labour and birth-giving. However, the metafictional frame-narrative functions to open up a degree of distance, wherein we are invited to question, decode and infer meanings that may not be readily apparent. Particularly important in this respect is yet another mother-figure present in the text, that of an imagined and/or hallucinated shadow-mother whose persistent presence functions as a projection of Jeannie's more ambivalent feelings and fears about her impending motherhood that she struggles to acknowledge or accept within herself. In this way, the narrative is not a singular or dominant expression of maternal consciousness, but instead, opens itself up to the possibilities of fragmentation, irony and contradiction.

In an early review of *Dancing Girls,* Patricia Morley describes "Giving Birth" as a story wherein "[t]he physical sensations, emotions, reflections of a modern woman in labour are described both accurately and imaginatively" (188). Judith McCombs describes the story as "a portrait of the artist as female" and, more to the point, an expression of "The Writer as

Mother/The Mother as Writer" ("Atwood's" 81). Kathleen Wall draws attention to the "framed representations of women" in the story, noting that the labouring body Atwood depicts is not that which has been "traditionally the object of the male gaze" but rather one which attempts to "de-romanticize and de-reify the female body" (75).[121] Jennifer Murray speculates on Atwood's creative choice in using this narrative framing, suggesting that since "the autobiographical stance of the first-person narrator may become another form of entrapment, (Atwood's daughter was born in 1976) the author takes precaution with her narrating perspective… shift[ing] writerly authority onto her narrator" instead (n.pag.). Most pertinently, Pascale Sardin argues that "Giving Birth" cultivates an "intimate link… between gestating books and babies" and that "this traditional dichotomy, which raises the issue of women's creativity in the artistic field, is negated" (164). He notes further that "the relationship between creation and procreation has rarely been a straightforward one for women artists, even in the twentieth century" and that Atwood's 1977 story "fictionalizes this dichotomy by giving voice to a female narrator seen in the act of writing the story of Jeanie's [sic] childbirth" (Sardin 164).[122]

The story opens with a metafictional meditation on the title of the story, the nature of language and its connectedness to the birthing body. In the first line, Atwood's narrator asks of the phrase/ title "giving birth," "But who gives it? And to whom is it given?" (Atwood *DG*

---

[121] Furthermore, "the frame and the framed bodies interact in a way that subversively calls attention to the margin and the marginal" (Wall 75). Wall highlights Atwood's use of the *mise en abyme* in her nested narratives of a mother (unnamed narrator) writing about a mother (Jeannie) imagining or hallucinating yet another mother. She notes that the use of *mise en abyme* "reflects both what is and what is not represented in the narrative or in the representation between the frames" (Wall 76). Jennifer Murray likewise comments on what she describes as "an atypical narrating perspective" of "a first person narrator" who functions as "an intermediary character" between the reader and the central protagonist, Jeannie (n.pag.).

[122] Sardin goes on to argue that Atwood's use of imagery in "Giving Birth" cultivates an "analogy between the creative power of language and that of the female body" (169). Finally, Sardin observes that Atwood "dramatizes the fact that the subject of the writer is split in the act of writing" and that "creation take[s] place when the limits between persona and author are blurred, when the mask is inserted between reality and fiction" (171). "Giving Birth" functions "as a lens through which to reflect, more or less ironically, on the act of writing" and "as a means by which we can reflect on… Atwood's… understanding of feminine creativity" (164).

226).[123] The ontological question is, of course, more than a linguistic query, as the knowledgeable narrator observes that "Certainly it doesn't feel like giving, which implies a flow, a gentle handing over, no coercion" (226). She thus reveals immediately that she has first-hand knowledge and is a biological mother herself, intimately acquainted with the sensations and experiences of childbirth, as she confirms in the following sentence that "there is scant gentleness here, it's too strenuous, the belly like a knotted fist, squeezing, the heavy trudge of the heart, every muscle in the body tight and moving" (226). Euphemistic or symbolic terminology such as "giving birth" belies the inescapable and corporeal *work* of labour, and the extent to which one is "coerced" (226) into the experience by bodily exigency. The narrator goes on to speculate that "Maybe the phrase was made by someone viewing the result only: in this case, the rows of babies to whom birth has occurred, lying like neat packages in their expertly wrapped blankets, pink or blue… behind the plate-glass window" (226). The sterile discourse that commonly surrounds childbirth is clearly generated and circulated by those who have not experienced it, who encounter the resultant babies only, their distance and disconnection emblematized in the "plate-glass window" that separates them and keeps them on the outside. In many ways, Atwood's story is an attempt to pull back the veils of language that shroud childbirth, both in her questioning of language itself, and in the narrative's detailed recounting of a woman's experience of giving birth. As she explains, "language, mutter[s] in its archaic tongues of something, yet one more thing, that needs to be re-named" (227). Atwood's narrator

[123] Of the opening line, Wall argues that "The story's very first sentence 'overflows' boundaries by interrogating the title in a gesture that… problematizes the relationship between the inside and the outside of the text" (78) and Nicholas Royle likewise notes the unusual use of the word "But" as an opening to a literary work, and draws attention to the word's "strange relation to the title, as if there is already turbulence between what is overhead and underneath, as if the text proceeds by resisting or contesting its own name, its entitlement to its title" (n.pag.). Furthermore, "there is a sort of doubling or division, even a scattering of voice and perspective: the "But" inaugurates another voice, as if the text began in or with the voice of another" (Royle n.pag.).

then undertakes a series of ironic denials and disavowals, declaring that she is not one to challenge the nature of language: "It won't be by me, though. These are the only words I have, I'm stuck with them, stuck in them" (227). However, notwithstanding her apparent entrapment, Atwood *is* challenging and questioning the nature of language from the very first word of the story. She is aware of the dangers of complacency, and wonders, "Will I break free, or will I be sucked down…? Words ripple at my feet black, sluggish, lethal. Let me try once more… while I can. It's only a tableau after all, it's only a metaphor. See, I can speak, I am not trapped, and you on your part can understand. So we will go ahead as if there were no problem about language." (227).[124]

Finally, Atwood's narrator attempts to distance herself entirely from the story she is about to tell, announcing that "This story about giving birth is not about me" (227). However, in the lines that follow, she calls even this statement into question when she explains, "In order to convince you of that I should tell you what I did this morning, before I sat down at this desk… I got up at twenty-to-seven, and, halfway down the stairs, met my daughter, who was ascending, autonomously she thought, actually in the arms of her father. We greeted each other with hugs and smiles" (227). The details of their morning follow, lying in bed together playing "with the alarm clock and the hot water bottle," getting dressed while her daughter "explored the bathroom scales and the mysterious white altar of the toilet," having "the usual struggle over her clothes" while noting that "Already she is wearing miniature jeans, miniature T-shirts," after all of which "she fed herself: orange, banana, muffin, porridge" (227-228). We are caught in the minutiae of

[124] Nicholas Royle describes this passage as among "the most disappointing sentences in Atwood's oeuvre" since, "Atwood's text is interesting precisely insofar as it foregrounds and indeed gets stuck in the question and in the experience of" language as problematic (n.pag.).

the morning with the narrator and her two-year old daughter, where they also "went out to the sunporch" and "recognized anew, and by their names, the dog, the cats and the birds, bluejays and goldfinches" and the daughter also raises her hands to her mother's mouth: "She puts her fingers on my lips as I pronounce these words; she hasn't yet learned the secret of making them" (228).[125] The fact that all of this is supposed to function as a disavowal of the birth story which follows is poignantly ironic, as all these details do is confirm ever more firmly the narrator's own maternal subjectivity and experience, and so one would naturally infer that she gave birth to this daughter, casting her previous dissociation and dispassion for the subsequent birth story into question. Kathleen Wall likewise argues that "one is all but directed to wonder how this description of a morning with a child proves that she is *not* some one who gave birth" (80).

The narrator also subtly affirms the parallels in their identities and narratives a little later, when she notes that "My own hair is not light brown, but Jeannie's was. This is one difference between us" (Atwood *DG* 229). This divergence between them is so minute and insignificant that it almost seems to infer that, other than this, they are largely alike. Sardin describes this doubled disavowal as "an ironic Freudian negation" that "confirm[s] the ontological and tautological fact that 'alter egos' are both the same and other" (165). McCombs likewise argues that "Jeannie (genie, genius) of the inset story, the one who is now giving birth, is a woman who might well be the writer's former, pre-birth self, surviving now only in fiction" ("Atwood's" 82). Wall likewise explains that many critics agree that "Jeannie… is a previous incarnation of the narrator who is using the narrative to recapture an experience not easily remembered, partly

[125] There is an analogous moment in Brossard's *These Our Mothers* where the narrator of one of the unnamed prose-poems recalls herself as a child exploring her mother's mouth: "I open her mouth with my thumb and index finger… The search. I part her lips… I have to see for my own ends. She lets me do it, I don't threaten any part of her true identity yet… Her mouth like an essential and vital egg, ambiguous. In the beginning. AAAAA. My thumb masters the lower jaw. Her breath is in my eyes" (Brossard *TOM* 19). Brossard's scene is told from the inverse perspective, as the child encountering the mother, whereas in Atwood, it is the mother's point of view of the child's exploration.

because she has been so transformed by childbirth and motherhood that her earlier self is not readily recalled… [and] partly because there is no language to facilitate memory" (82). Atwood's maternal consciousness is thus one that is slippery and double-sided, ironic and evasive. This is, even as she claims this is not, her story.

Finally, in another of the story's metafictional turns, the unnamed narrator announces of her daughter and herself: "Now she's having her nap and I am writing this story" (Atwood *DG* 228). This sentence draws attention to the deliberate constructedness of the fiction we are reading, situates the narrator and her daughter in a particular space and time, and establishes a certain distance between the narrative we are reading thus far and the one, about Jeannie, that is about to begin. Atwood's nameless narrator-mother insists upon the mundane ordinariness of her life, remarking that "you can see that my life (despite these occasional surprises, reminders of another world) is calm and orderly, suffused with that warm, reddish light… realistic in detail and slightly sentimental" (229). She affirms the materiality of her life, noting that "above all it's solid, everything here has solidity. No more of those washes of light, those shifts, nebulous effects of cloud, Turner sunsets, vague fears, the impalpables Jeannie used to concern herself with" (229). McCombs describes Atwood's "unnamed writer-narrator" as "a solitary, hardworking female artist, leading an orderly female life; she tends her child, says Goodbye to its father on the days he leaves early, and writes the inset story while the baby naps. The story she creates, which is of giving birth, is a multilayered female conceit, wherein maternal creation stands for artistic creation" ("Atwood's" 82). The contrast between the solidity of the narrator's life and the ethereal existence of Jeannie is reinforced by the observation that "Jeannie isn't real in the same way that I am real" but, of course, both the narrator and Jeannie have the same degree of reality/unreality for the reader, a fact that Atwood acknowledges immediately

following when she addresses the reader directly: "But by now, and I mean your time, both of us will have the same degree of reality, we will be equal: wraiths, echoes, reverberations in your own brain. At the moment though Jeannie is to me as I will some day be to you. So she is real enough" (Atwood *DG* 229).

Jeannie's birth narrative shifts into the third-person and present tense, a formal element which marks the transition to a new, displaced subjectivity with a sense of heightened urgency and immediacy (though our first narrator never completely disappears—she interjects periodically via parenthetical remarks and observations).[126] Atwood's writer-narrator begins, "Jeannie is on her way to the hospital, to give birth, to be delivered. She is not quibbling over these terms. She's sitting in the back seat of the car, with her eyes closed and her coat spread over her like a blanket. She is doing her breathing exercises and timing her contractions with a stopwatch" (229-230). The fact that Jeannie "is not quibbling over these terms" distances herself and her material experience from that of our unnamed narrator who, in contrast, *is* preoccupied with language and representation. Jeannie, on the other hand, is counting in her head during her contractions "from one to ten while breathing in, from ten to one while breathing out" and is so consumed with her concentration that "she can actually see [the numbers] while she is silently pronouncing them. Each number is a different colour and, if she's concentrating very hard, a different typeface. They range from plain Roman to ornamented circus numbers, red with gold filigree and dots" (230). In yet another ironic turn, the shifting colours and typeface of the imagined numbers reveals that Jeannie is perhaps just as concerned with the materiality of

[126] Of this narrative framing, Kathleen Wall argues that "Because the frame narrative uses past tense, and the *mise en abyme* makes use of the present, the naturalness of the frame and the artificiality of Jeannie's story are emphasized. Second, the psycho-narration is not entirely consonant: the narrator frequently makes judgments about Jeannie's behavior that distance her from Jeannie yet indicate the narrator's privileged knowledge" (81).

language as her creator/narrator, even though her focus is on the formal elements of the alphabet rather than its shifts in meaning.[127]

The narrator interjects and addresses the reader directly, remarking in parentheses, "(By this time you may be thinking that I've invented Jeannie in order to distance myself from these experiences. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am, in fact, trying to bring myself closer to something that time has already made distant. As for Jeannie, my intention is simple: I am bringing her back to life.)" (230). She reveals that in telling Jeannie's story, she is seeking to bring herself closer to her own maternal experiences, resurrecting a self in transition from pre- to post-partum, capturing in detail the materiality of childbirth. Once again, her phrasing is purposefully evasive; she does not declare outright that Jeannie is her. But she suggests an affinity between them, and a seeking to recapture a particular version of herself that has been lost in motherhood.

As we return to Jeannie's narrative, we discover that she is being driven to the hospital by her partner and the father of her child, referred to only as "A., for convenience" (230). However, A. and Jeannie are not alone, as we discover that, in fact, "There are two other people in the car with Jeannie" (230) and the second person is "another woman… sitting in the front seat" who "hasn't turned or acknowledged Jeannie in any way" even though "She, like Jeannie, is going to the hospital. She too is pregnant" (231). McCombs describes this woman as an accompanying "third, shadow woman, who is alone and burdened by an unwanted pregnancy, who may die, or lose her baby; she is Jeannie's double, other self, Jeannie as she might have been, other women as they are" ("Atwood's" 82). Sardin characterizes her as "a doomed alter ego" onto whom

[127] Jeannie is also revealed to have "numerous books," "two shelves" of which "cover everything form building kitchen cabinets to auto repairs to smoking your own hams" (230), further emphasizing her investment in books and the primacy of the written word.

"Jeanie [sic]… projects her own fears and evil thoughts" (164). Jennifer Murray describes this mysterious woman as a "figure of the unreal other" who "points towards an unconscious projection of fear, or, in other words, towards the uncanny" (n.pag.). This Freudian projection of fears onto objects and other people "infuse[s]" otherwise "familiar environment[s]… with a strangeness produced by this projection of the repressed" which in this case "take[s] the form… of a foreign, ageless, endangered double" (Murray n.pag.).

This haunting of Jeannie by this other, mysterious woman is not a sudden or unexpected experience, as "Jeannie has seen her before… from time to time throughout her pregnancy" (Atwood *DG* 232). She is described as "wearing a cloth coat with checks in maroon and brown, and she has a kerchief tied over her hair" (232). Jeannie "knows little about her except that she is a woman who did not wish to become pregnant, who did not choose to divide herself like that, who did not choose any of these ordeals, these initiations" (232). Sardin interprets this imagined, double-woman as a "sinister figure," the colours of her coat representing "clotted blood, [and] all the miseries of unwanted pregnancy" (166). He suggests that "this shadowy figure is the actual protagonist of Atwood's story," functioning as a screen onto which "Jeanie [sic] projects… all her fears and negative feelings concerning maternity" (166).[128]

As the date for Jeannie's labour approaches, the presence of the woman grows more frequent and ubiquitous: "As Jeannie has come closer and closer to this day, the unknown day on which she will give birth… she has seen this woman more and more often, though always from a

[128] And indeed, the forcible and compulsory birth that Jeannie's shadow/double is about to undergo unwillingly is likened by Atwood's narrator to rape: "It would be no use telling her that everything is going to be fine. The word in English for unwanted intercourse is rape, but there is no word in the language for what is about to happen to this woman" (Atwood 232). Murray similarly notes that this "other woman… represents the dark side of maternity—not only the physical risk which accompanies the process, but also maternity under other more structurally hazardous conditions" (n.pag.). And of the limitations of language, Sardin remarks that "Atwood's narrator acknowledges the existential fault of language" and that the writer/narrator is left "to mourn… the inadequacy of language, for the story of the alienating side of mothering may well be an untellable story" (168).

distance." (233). Jeannie "is aware that the woman is not really there: Jeannie is not crazy… Jeannie isn't exactly afraid of this woman. She is afraid for her" (234). Later, in the midst of labour, Jeannie thinks once again about this "other woman" whose "motives… are unclear" (237). She knows intuitively that she is a reluctant and fearful mother, and wonders, "Why doesn't she want to have a baby? Has she been raped, does she have ten other children, is she starving? Why hasn't she had an abortion?... Her face, distorted with pain and terror, floats briefly behind Jeannie's eyes before it too drifts away" (237-238). Wall explains that "The other woman—who is largely silent, in contrast to the frame narrator whose profession is words—is frightening because she is (seen as) the helpless object of various typical abuses—rape, poverty, violence, and it is perhaps precisely the protagonists' fear of her and her experience that makes her 'Other.'" (87).

The other woman also serves as a projection of Jeannie's fears of childbirth, a subject onto which her own pain and suffering can be displaced and externalized. As she waits to be assigned a private room, she can hear that "Nearby someone is screaming, screaming and mumbling between screams in what sounds like a foreign language. Portuguese, Jeannie thinks. She tells herself that for them it is different, you're supposed to scream… it's a required part of giving birth" (234). Identifying the screaming woman as Portuguese establishes even more distance between them, "othering" her with a different nationality. But at the same time, this "other" woman is much closer than Jeannie tries to pretend, as she identifies her as the same phantom-woman who has been following her throughout her pregnancy and who was in the car with her and A.: "Nevertheless she knows that the woman screaming is the other woman and she is screaming from pain" (234). Later, as they admit Jeannie into her own room, "a woman is wheeled past on a table, covered by a sheet. Her eyes are closed and there's a bottle feeding into

her arm through a tube. Something is wrong. Jeannie looks back—she thinks it was the other woman—but the sheeted table is hidden now behind the counter" (235-236). This encounter with Jeannie's double functions as a projection of the frightening prospect of catastrophic maternal complications in birth. As Wall explains, this other woman "allows Atwood to depict what is paradoxically contained in yet absent from Jeannie's own experience" (79). Furthermore, "Jeannie can project the anxieties that she doesn't want fully to claim onto the other woman" (Wall 80). As labour intensifies for Jeannie, she admits to these darker imaginings, noting that "she is risking her life, though it's not too likely she will die. Still, some women do. Internal bleeding, shock, heart failure, a mistake on the part of someone, a nurse, a doctor" (237). She then "thinks momentarily about the other woman… Her face, distorted with pain and terror, floats briefly behind Jeannie's eyes before it too drifts away" (237-238).

As Jeannie's contractions become stronger and more frequent, Atwood returns again to the nature of language, its relationship to selfhood and the ways in which both begin to recede and vanish in the midst of physical pain. With each new wave of contractions Jeannie "slips back into the dark place, which is not hell, which is more like being inside, trying to get out. *Out,* she says or thinks" and in the intervals between contractions she surfaces: "From minute to minute she comes up again, grabs for air" (239). Beset by strong contractions, "Jeannie's options seem to be escape or dissociation from her body" (Wall 79). In the intervals between contractions, the pain becomes a distant memory, but when it returns to overcome her, she experiences an erasure of the self: "When there is no pain she feels nothing, when there is pain, she feels nothing because there is no *she*. This, finally, is the disappearance of language. *You don't remember afterwards*, she has been told by almost everyone" (239). And now, for the first time, Jeannie

understands exactly how that sort of amnesia or erasure is possible. If there is no language to describe it, and no self to remember it, the experience vanishes.[129]

When it is time to push, "Jeannie grips with her hands, grits her teeth, face, her whole body together, a snarl, a fierce smile, the baby is enormous, a stone, a boulder, her bones unlock, and, once, twice, the third time, she opens like a birdcage turning slowly inside out" (Atwood *DG* 241). When she finally opens her eyes to see the baby that has been brought to her, she observes, "The baby isn't crying; she squints in the new light. Birth isn't something that has been given to her, nor has she taken it. It was just something that has happened so they could greet each other like this" (241). Here, Atwood resolves the questions she posed at the outset, about the semantics of giving birth, noting that it is nothing that has actually been given or taken from anyone, but rather an event that has simply occurred in order for mother and child to encounter each other for the first time. Jeannie notes that there was no special "vision" given unto her for enduring the experience, she "is conscious of no special knowledge; already she's forgetting what it was like" (241).

Now that the trial of pregnancy and birth are over, the haunting by the other woman has also ended. She observes that "Everything is quiet, the other woman is no longer screaming. Something has happened to her, Jeannie knows. Is she dead? Is the baby dead? Perhaps she is one of those casualties (and how can Jeannie herself be sure, yet, that she will not be among them) who will go into postpartum depression and never come out" (241). In response to A.'s congratulatory, "You see, there was nothing to be afraid of," Jeannie thinks but doesn't verbalize that, in this assertion, "he was wrong" (241), since the unknown fate of Jeannie's shadow-self

[129] Wall notes that "this disconnection is related to the inadequacy of a language that has no words" for such corporeal experiences (79). Sardin likewise observes that "This dissolution of identity accompanies the desertion of words" (168).

represents the largely unspoken, potential calamities of childbirth (however rare) that can lead to maternal or infant mortality. And with the uncertain, anxious observation that Jeannie "herself" cannot yet "be sure" that she will escape the scourge of postpartum depression, even though she may have survived the birth, she recognizes that she is not quite safe yet.

The following morning, Jeannie awakes at first light and goes to the window, despite the warnings not to get out of bed for the first time without a nurse, since "She feels she's been inside too long, she wants to see the sun come up" (242). She feels a slippery elusiveness and erasure of selfhood, as the narrator remarks that "Being awake this early always makes her feel a little unreal, a little insubstantial, as if she's partly transparent, partly dead" (242). The narrator suddenly interjects in parenthesis, returning to the opening, thematic considerations of the meaning of giving birth, observing that "(It was to me, after all, that the birth was given, Jeannie gave it, I am the result. What would she make of me? Would she be pleased?)" (242). This sudden insertion opens-up questions about the identity of our unnamed narrator and her relationship to Jeannie, as well as drawing attention to the metafictional qualities of the story we have been reading. Typically, we understand that the writer creates their narratives, and in this case, that our writer-narrator has created Jeannie for us. However, Atwood reverses this relationship by asserting that Jeannie has, in fact, created our narrator. Atwood connects Jeannie and our narrator along an intimate and singular trajectory, revealing that Jeannie's birth experience is, in fact, our narrator's, looking back two years later. More profoundly, Atwood is suggesting that what is born/created through birth-giving is not just a child, but a mother, and therefore, a new maternal consciousness.

The story concludes with the new baby being "carried in, solid, substantial, packed together like an apple" (Atwood *DG* 242-243), an Edenic source of new and forbidden

knowledge, and the new mother "examines her" and notes with satisfaction that "she is complete" (243). Jeannie's maternal transformation involves the erasure of her old self and the birth of a new self: "in the days that follow, Jeannie herself becomes drifted over with new words, her hair slowly darkens, she ceases to be what she was and is replaced, gradually, by someone else" (243). This experience of matrescence—a "recently revived… anthropological category" akin to adolescence and which refers to the process of becoming a mother (Seltzer n.pag.)—involves the erasure of Jeannie's pre-mother self and its replacement with an entirely new, maternal self.[130] McCombs notes that "though the baby (story) is 'complete'… at birth, the whole earth, everything, the seer herself (Jeannie, genie, writer) are in flux" ("Atwood's" 83). She further remarks that "the pre-mother writer is disappearing, drifted over with the words she is teaching the baby, about to be drifted over with the first word (mama?) the baby is about to utter" (McCombs "Atwood's" 83). Symbolizing this transformation as well is the departure of the shadow-mother, who Jeannie imagines—upon hearing footsteps in the hall—is finally leaving the hospital: "Jeannie hears footsteps in the hall outside her door. She thinks it must be the other woman, in her brown and maroon checked coat, carrying her paper bag, leaving the hospital now that her job is done. She has seen Jeannie safely through" (Atwood *DG* 242). Jeannie's imagined double is likewise transformed, from a projection of Jeannie's worst fears and anxieties, to a guardian angel of sorts, who has accompanied Jeannie in her journey in order to protect her from its most terrible outcomes.[131]

---

[130] It is worth noting that there is also an undercurrent of unease here, and something distinctly unsettling about this instability of the self, as emblematized in this kind of personal erasure and rebirth. Murray notes that the stories of *Dancing Girls*, of which "Giving Birth" is the concluding narrative, "propose tales of emotional crises" and that "the state of anxiety is, in itself, constitutive of the catastrophe. This anxiety is often left active at the end of the stories, suggesting a universe of impending or immanent loss" (n.pag.). She further notes that "the usual Gothic figures—the foreigner, the other, the stalker, the diseased or deformed—all find their way into these stories" (Murray n.pag.).
[131] Wall likewise concurs that "As the recipient of these projections, the other woman also functions as a talisman" (80).

Atwood's layers of maternal figures in "Giving Birth," from our narrator-mother, to Jeannie, to the 'other,' imagined shadow-mother, reveal the fragmentary nature of motherhood and maternal experience. As McCombs observes, "the selves split off, shadow woman and Jeannie, Jeannie and writer, babies and mothers, but the splitting is creative and maternal, not alienated, not sterile" ("Atwood's" 83). Rather than a singular or universal maternal story, Atwood's nested-narrative structure and multiplicity of maternal perspectives allow her to capture a myriad of maternal possibilities and subjectivities, alongside motherhood's anxieties, fears and occasional darkness. As a "portrait… of the artist" it is "female, multiple, and visionary" (McCombs "Atwood's" 84). "Giving Birth" also emphasizes the transformative power of childbirth and new motherhood, and the ways in which the self and one's perceptions are profoundly and permanently altered.

**"These… Mothers" of Nicole Brossard**

Since the 1970s, the prolific and celebrated work of Quebecoise writer Nicole Brossard has been deeply invested in actively dismantling patriarchal literary traditions and asserting in their place a radical, lesbian and feminist poetics. In Quebec in particular, "the project of 'writing like a woman,' that is to say, from a woman's vantage point and experience, from a woman's body, and in a language that could be regarded as primarily woman-made has, in fact, emerged as a new and transgressive literary mode of political intervention" (Gould 4). And while Brossard's oeuvre forms a part of the Canadian literary canon, and I explore her work here in relation to other Canadian maternal texts, it is worth noting the unique specificity of her Quebecois context, which "represents an important 'borderland' for feminist theory and its transmission" (Wheeler 427). As Karen Gould notes, the "relatively swift changes in the

institutional structures, economic relations, and cultural life of Quebec during the 1960s and 1970s gave a particular cast to emerging discussions of sexual politics and feminist aesthetics" (4). Furthermore, "Nicole Brossard has observed that the Church's loss of control over sexuality—women's sexuality and their attitudes about sexual practice in particular—brought about important modifications and, for some women, radical transformations in the relationships they had previously maintained with… figures who had traditionally represented the political, economic, cultural, and sexual power of male authority in Quebec" (6-7). And while Quebec feminists of the 1960s and '70s had "rel[ied] heavily on the male-authored political and social theories of the left, radical feminists in Quebec were turning increasingly toward one another" (29) and were heavily influenced by the "[i]ntellectual debates in France… particularly among feminist writers, academics, and intellectuals" (34). Gould cites both Cixous and Irigaray as culturally influential, and highlights the extent to which Quebecoise feminist writers of the 1970s "view[ed]" their "experiential writing practice as a real mode of political intervention and resistance rather than merely as an abstract and culturally disengaged intellectual project" (40). Brossard's work in particular "lies at a unique historical and cultural juncture between a literature of modernity that has consciously broken with the past and an experimental women's writing that has added a gender specificity and an unavoidably political dimension to some of the more radical practices of textual modernity in Quebec" (52). Beverly Curran likewise notes that Brossard "developed from a gender-neutral modernist into an influential theoretician and practitioner of *écriture au féminin.*[132]" (124), a term Brossard herself began using "around 1978

[132] Susan Knutson, drawing in part from Barbara Godard's definitions, describes *écriture au féminin* as a confrontation of the symbolic, and one which "disrupts the binary oppositions structuring normative discourse" (Knuston 193). In contrast, she describes *écriture féminin* as engaging with tropes or essentialisms of femininity. She argues that "the expression *au féminin* constitutes a discursive acquisition of the feminist movement in Québec and, to a more limited extent, in English Canada" (193).

to represent her own unique approach to writing" (Forsyth "To Write" 49). Furthermore, "[i]n all her texts, Brossard considers writing to be a praxis, a means to intervene effectively on the forum of society while giving form to woman's vision of the universe" (Forsyth "Beyond" 158). And as Louise Forsyth notes, "Since language is symbol, the body and its desire are transformed by writing so that they enter the symbolic dimension where they become political by being communicated and shared" (158).[133]

The publication of *L'amèr ou Le chapitre effrité* in 1977, translated by Barbara Godard into English in 1983 as *These Our Mothers: Or: The Disintegrating Chapter*, marked the birth of Brossard's feminist poetics and coincided with her newfound lesbian consciousness (Daurio 43). Brossard explains that "in 1974, I became a mother and about the same time fell in love with another woman. Suddenly, I was living the most common experience in a woman's life which is motherhood and at the same time I was living the most marginal experience in a woman's life which is lesbianism" ("Poetic" 77). This unique positionality provided a rich setting for new ways of thinking and being in the world, as "Motherhood made life absolutely concrete (two bodies to wash, to clean, to move, to think of) and lesbianism made my life absolute fiction in a patriarchal heterosexual world" (78).[134] It is this very corporeal rootedness of motherhood which

---

[133] Brossard confirms the feminist politics that informs her work in numerous interviews and other literary texts. In a 1993 interview with Lynne Huffer, Brossard reveals that she is still captivated by the transgressive potentialities of literature and by her feminist ideals, explaining, "I am still the writer who cannot let go of the idea that literature, is subversion, transgression, and vision. I am still the feminist who thinks women have been and are still marginalized by the patriarchal system" (Huffer 115). She emphasizes the importance of women's continued self-invention, noting that "somehow we women have to invent our own idea of woman in order to enjoy being a woman and to proceed as a creative subject in language" (117). Around the same time, in her 1990 essay "Poetic Politics," Brossard emphasizes that women continue to be oppressed and silenced by patriarchal systems and ideologies, and that therefore the overarching goal of her literary creativity is to carve out space for women's voices and women's subjectivity: "As a woman, I am left with a language that has either erased or marginalized women as subjects. Therefore in my poetic I perform what is necessary to make space for women's subjectivity and plurality, to make space for a positive image of women. This task engages me to question language—symbolic and imaginary, from all angles and dimensions" (81).

[134] Brossard reveals the importance of her confluent experiences of motherhood and lesbianism in an earlier interview from 1989, where she explains in similar terms, "It was not until the day I became a mother that I finally

begins to transform Brossard's writing, as she explains further that, "my body was getting new ideas, new feelings, new emotions. From then on my writing started to change. It became more fluid, though still abstract and still obsessed with language, transgression, and subversion; but this time I had 'carnal knowledge' of what I was investing in words" (78). The thematic parallels between Brossard's lived experiences and the subject matter of *These Our Mothers* are obvious and plentiful, as the text "offers a profound reconfiguration of gender in its foregrounding of the lesbian as mother and subject" (Curran 130). In a lecture delivered jointly with Daphne Marlatt in 1996, Brossard reiterates the tidal-shift in self-identification that motherhood triggers for her, explaining that "In becoming a mother, the weight of woman's humanity fell on my shoulders. All the weight of the 'second sex.' All the weight of patriarchy and the sounds of its big boots of tradition and culture trampling the life and energy of women. Weight of reality. Oh yes, it came to me suddenly that I was also a woman, that I was like other women, a branded and targeted body" (Brossard and Marlatt 8). Her new awareness of her identity as woman develops as a direct result of her motherhood, as "This time the body talks live. The neutral has vanished. The feminine overflows. The body is not anymore an abstraction. It now weighs as reality… The mother that I am is another body in the middle of a grand tour which reintegrates me in the big ensemble of women. I suddenly understand that to give life is to raise the question of gender and that, of course, doesn't go without vertigo and the trembling of meaning" (8). Now that "the feminine becomes an ambiance," "the feminine body is unavoidable" and she finds herself "at the heart of the subject of nature… at the heart of the symbolic, matter of life and death," Brossard confronts the implications this has on her writing and her creative work: "This is where

---

understood what was meant by the feminine condition. I also fell in love with a woman at about the same time. All of which is to say that motherhood, which is the most common experience of all women, made me into a feminist and that lesbian love, which is the most marginal experience in the life of women, gave me access to a new imagery space. This explains why I write at the point where feminist consciousness and lesbian emotion meet" (Joubert 46).

it gets complicated" because "[t]he imposture is in language, in the symbolic and spread all over in the imaginaryscape [sic]… How can I make sense as a feminine subject in a language which makes women invisible and simultaneously points to them as inadequate" (8). She comes to the realization that "I will need to re-evaluate my notion of representation. I will need to lift up, one by one, the semantic layers of hardship covering women's lives. Cut short in the fat of phallocentrism" (8). Ultimately, she must "start working on mother tongue so I can think twice in it" (8).

As the title suggests, *These Our Mothers: Or: The Disintegrating Chapter* is deeply invested in the maternal and matrilineage, and seeks to enact a dismantling or "disintegration" (as per the subtitle) of patriarchal structures of power and literary form.[135] And in the place of this "language of the father" (Gould 74) or "the authority of a male tradition" (Godard 23), Brossard espouses "maternal values of interdependence and multiplicity" (23).[136] For my purposes here, I am most interested in the maternal elements of the text, and the ways in which Brossard mobilizes motherhood, and specifically lesbian motherhood, as a means for subverting and undoing established patriarchal norms. As Marie Carrière argues, "*L'Amèr…* presents a sharp critique of Western, androcentric representations of maternity" (61) and in "recasting… the maternal other in newly negotiated terms, the narrator finds new ways to relate to and exist as a (m)other, forging a feminist and lesbian ethics" (69). Lesbian maternal consciousness, as expressed in *These Our Mothers,* is a means by which Brossard escapes the oppressions of patriarchy. Godard also emphasizes the centrality of the maternal in Brossard's project, arguing

---

[135] Godard notes that the work's subtitle "points to the effect this unauthorized communal feminist text has in dissolving the authority of a male tradition of the book" (23). Gould likewise notes that *These Our Mothers* is Brossard's "creative resistance to patriarchal power" which "manifests itself in the form of a dramatized break with the language of the father" (74).

[136] Alice Parker notes that "*L'Amèr* set in motion a long-term writing project to define subjectivity at the intersection of female and lesbian self-apprehension" ("Le mal" 60).

that "The Brossardian text is located in that space between the breast and the child, the narrative revealing itself as the reproduction of the species and the theoretical text about its own processes of production, moving back and forth from mother to against mother. Through its ungrammaticality, its breaking of the rules, *L'Amèr* would effect a radical critique of the 'phallogocentrism' of male discourse" (25).

The original French title, *L'Amèr*, plays on three meanings—"*la mère* (the mother), *la mer* (the sea), and *l'amer* (the bitter)" (Bök n.pag.). This triplicate meaning is reproduced in Godard's English translation "through elision: these our mothers, the sea our mother, and the sour mothers" (n.pag.). However, as Christian Bök notes, this dismantling and play of meaning "in the title immediately announces the feminist attempt to undercut, to parry, to disarm, the hegemony of phallogocentric signification" (n.pag.). Brossard also announces her combative and political intent in the opening of the text, writing that, "It's combat. The book. Fiction begins suspended mobile between words and the body's likeness to this *our* devouring and devoured mother" (Brossard *TOM* 8). The contradiction between the indeterminacy of being "suspended" and the potential in mobility conjures an ambiguous space of in-betweenness, alongside a mother that is both "devouring and devoured," an excess of meaning in all directions. The likeness of "the body" to that of the mother genders the poem's speaker as female, creating a maternal lineage that, as the prose-poem on the following page reveals, is generative of a primary connection and transference of the language of the mother: "The first word lips and sticky saliva on her breasts" (9). This first connection, through the maternal breast, is disrupted by "theory" only once this bond is broken: "Theory begins there when the breast or the child moves away. Strategic wound or suspended meaning" (9). This newly opened wound or space between the

mother and child is that into which "theory" or, as Kristeva might put it, "the symbolic" enters.[137]

Brossard invokes her lesbian identity as an important marker of difference and resistance to patriarchy. She marks the simultaneity of "the same day. One black sex, one white sex. One I caress, the other I wash. Cyprine[138] juices, urine. Orgasm and labour as two sides of the same entity. Your bodies, lesbian lover and daughter" (13). Brossard identifies her lesbianism and her motherhood as "two sides of the same entity," centred in women's bodies and experiences of sexuality and birth, sensuality and caregiving. Each aspect of her life—both her lesbianism and her mothering—centre on the attention paid to the female body, alternately caressing and washing, and connecting the pleasure of sex to the pain of labour, both focused on corporeal experience and bodily sensation. Brossard navigates her way through these two interconnected though distinct relationships, to her lover and her daughter, through words: "I write so I won't engulf and hurt your bodies and so as to find in them my void, my centre" (13).[139] Brossard affirms the centrality of writing and desire as a means of escape from patriarchy, writing, "another day. The alphabet. In the beginning. Desire brings me endlessly back to it and, my present… forward flight" (13). The alphabet forms the originary material of words and

---

[137] Though Brossard may not cite Kristeva directly, her prose-poetry in *These Our Mothers* is particularly indebted to post-structuralism, semiotics and psychoanalysis, and reading her alongside Kristeva's theorization of the symbolic and the semiotic yields productive insights. As I elaborate in greater detail in Chapter Three, the genesis of Kristeva's concepts lie in "Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic order," which Kristeva then "transforms… into a distinction between the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*," where "[t]he semiotic is linked to the pre-Oedipal primary processes" and their "basic pulsions," whose "endless flow… is gathered up in the *chora* (from the Greek word for enclosed space, womb)" (Moi 12).

[138] As I noted in Chapter Three, "cyprine" does not exist in the *OED*. Cathy Paul, in her article on the maternal in the work of Rich, Brossard and Kristeva, notes that this absence is part of a broader alienation women experience from their own bodies. She notes that women "have been shamed by the regular flow of our bodily fluids—blood, milk, and cyprin. Until recently, our sexual secretions have remained nameless" (Paul 11).

[139] As Bök notes, "Brossard's text… demonstrates that, while phallogocentric ideology enforces an established schism between a woman's body and a woman's language, placing both under masculine control, a lesbian experience can defy this control by imbricating the poetic and the erotic" (n.pag.).

discourse, and Brossard's speaker is driven back to it by desire, while also pushing "forward" into "flight," rising upwards and above.

Liberation comes through refusing reproductive essentialisms and writing women into existence. As Brossard writes, "I have murdered the womb and I am writing it" (21, underline in original). She rejects the extent to which patriarchy coopts the maternal body and cultivates a discursive alternative that is rooted in her own materiality and experiences. In refusing her reproductive role within patriarchy, in declaring "I AM STERILE" (47), Brossard escapes from her oppression within motherhood and can begin to imagine alternate modes of being and mothering. Lesbianism and the lesbian mother are central to this project as well. As she writes, "It is while caressing the body of another woman over its entire living surface that she kills the mother, that the identical woman is born" (23). In killing the patriarchal mother and finding a reflection of herself in a same-sex lover, the woman is thus set free. Brossard makes clear that "It is not the mother's body which decays but that of every woman who has not found words to look at the bruised womb: the body of the mother as extended fiction. Matter… The biological mother isn't killed without a simultaneous explosion of fiction, ideology, utterance" (23). Women who have "not found words" to examine and express their oppression, emblematized in "the bruised womb" are ultimately set free once the "fiction" and "ideology" of patriarchy are exposed. Brossard exhorts women to "explode" the lies of patriarchy in order to escape from its oppressive embrace: "Before withdrawing. His-tory. She can only explode it, its passions, its parallels, its parameters. Bulging her belly one last time. For a girl" (24). And the final resultant pregnancy, and the girl she gives birth to, is her emancipated self.

Brossard also centres her own maternal experience in her path towards liberation and subjectivity. She writes, "Every morning I am called Mommy. I get up. I kiss her and I get her

breakfast ready" (20). This is followed by a necessary period of absence from one another so that Brossard's speaker can write the very text we are reading: "We separate for the day. Because I have to write this book" (20). This metafictional acknowledgment is followed by a further commentary on the text at hand, which she posits is necessary "to rid ourselves of a symbolic relationship or to begin to execute it: daughter-mother lesbians" (20). She confirms that the ideological project at hand in *These Our Mothers* is to ensure she and her daughter are no longer bound by patriarchal conceptions of the mother-daughter relationship, and are able, instead, to develop a new mode of relating to one another through the lens of lesbian motherhood. Notwithstanding their daily separation so Brossard's speaker can write, she notes that their relationship continues to be interdependent and symbiotic: "But we still haven't gotten our mutual autonomy. Her way is littered with objects she cannot reach. I open the refrigerator door. I open the drawers. I cook the food" (20). Brossard catalogues the various mundane objects and activities that she undertakes in caring for her daughter. Furthermore, these items and their materiality root her in the quotidian and utilitarian tasks of motherhood, shaping her experience of space and time: "My time is fragmented by these same objects. I am stuck to matter. Things are what I touch. I can neither dream them nor estimate their exchange value. Just like me, things are useful to keep me as well as the child alive" (20). Her maternal work forces her to integrate with the materiality of life, as the objects with which she cares for her child become "stuck" to her and extensions of herself.

Brossard makes her creativity visible alongside her motherhood, capturing the figure of the mother-artist at work, even as she struggles with guilt, self-doubt and a sense of inner conflict when her daughter is sick: "I write my daughter is sick. Fever. High. Anxiety: I have killed the womb. Caught in the whirlpool, the wave, the dread, the pallor. I write. What if I didn't stop for

hours. Bodies die. Feverish" (22). She "writes" while her "daughter is sick" and, simultaneously, writes that her "daughter is sick," both metafictionally describing what she is doing and recounting what is happening. The "high" fever also leads to a "high" or heightened state of anxiety. This anxiety is revealed to be not only that her daughter is unwell, but at the fact that "I have killed the womb" (22), refused patriarchal motherhood, and embarked on an uncharted path forward into lesbian motherhood. The "dread" she feels blends with her daughter's "pallor" and yet, she continues: "I write" (22). She worries about getting caught up in her creative pursuits, wondering "What if I didn't stop for hours?" (22). What if she neglects her child in the process? What if she inadvertently kills her, since, as she fearfully observes, "Bodies die" (22) and it is therefore within the realm of possibility?

These fears prove to be groundless, as shortly after, "The fever has dropped" and Brossard finds affirmation in both her writing and her loving relationship, explaining that, "I write my love" while outlining scenes of domestic happiness and togetherness: "A Sunday morning listening to Edith Piaf. All three of us dance. I am in their arms. We whisper sounds to each other in our ears and on our mouths. We dance very close together. Pressedhard" (22). The closeness of the three family members is formally rendered in the two words, "pressed" and "hard," literally pushed up against one another, and their mutual commitment to one another is revealed in the observation that "Nobody here wants to be lost. Matter and words. The moment but also because we are speaking" (22). The communication and understanding that takes place in the "words" they exchange is just as important as their physical closeness, blending both the discursive and the bodily in "Carnal interrogatives. Imperatives like shoulders in the tango" (22). She affirms her maternal presence and that of her lesbian partner, "Mommy is there, stranger like

a different woman, close like a beginning" (22). She seeks to inure her family against hatred and bigotry, writing that "I am trying to make us afraid of nothing, not them, nor me, nor her" (22).

However, when she and her partner are out in the world with their daughter, she confesses to feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. She writes, "I am sitting on a bench in the park. My daughter is playing in the sand, right beside us. The other mothers who, we look at their children patiently. We don't speak a word to each other: what is there to exchange? A child. We could not do it" (26). Despite the commonality of having children of the same age, Brossard's speaker feels a dissociation from the other mothers in the park, who she describes as having submitted to patriarchy: "Here is the clan of patriarchal mothers. Devoted to men. Raising their young. Who have nothing to say. To exchange a domestic silence. Enclosed" (26). The claustrophobia of their "enclosure" and "domestic silence" comes to inhabit and infect the park, despite its location out of doors, in the fresh air. She repeats the image of her unknowing child, who plays innocently in the sand, "My daughter is playing in the sand, right beside us," alongside "The other mothers" with whom she feels no affinity. She explains that "The silence here is unbearable. Everything gravitates about a senseless grammar. I killed the womb too soon, alone and primitive in a park with for [sic] my entire vision" (26). Her declaration that she "killed the womb too soon" is an acknowledgment of her isolation and loneliness. She recognizes that in pursuing alternate, anti-patriarchal and lesbian modes of mothering, she has deliberately and definitively removed herself from the broader, heteronormative community of mothers. And while this is a political stance that she inhabits boldly and willingly, it is not without its social and personal consequences.

In fact, of more universal significance than lesbian motherhood is the very fact of being a woman, declaring one's womanhood and writing oneself into discourse. As Brossard muses, "To

write: I am a woman is heavy with consequences" (45). Alice Parker describes this phrase as "Brossard's signature" and one which "cycles back into her writing like a comet of measureless magnetic force… generat[ing] new energy and signifying potential" ("Nicole" 315-316). Karen McPherson likewise argues that this phrase is that "for which she is perhaps best known" and "exemplifies how fundamentally interconnected identity, gender and writing are for Brossard" (74).[140] McPherson unpacks the layers of signification, concluding that the sentence

> reflects (on) its own utterance, revealing a many-layered first person pronoun that is both describing and accomplishing the enunciative gesture, both in the present and in the future. With the formulation of this 'signature' phrase in *L'amèr,* Brossard accomplished a significantly 'autobiographical' (self-writing) gesture. Furthermore, one of the consequences of writing *je suis une femme* is that the woman in the text is *real*(ized). (74)

Louise Forsyth notes that "the heavy consequences of writing *I am a woman* produce the necessity to re-think the very bases on which one constructs one's sense of physical being in the material world, one's sense of self, subjectivity and identity, one's sense of moral agency, one's sense of relating to others, and one's sense of knowledge and reality" ("To Write" 41-42).

Brossard highlights her speaker's "physical being in the material world" (41) in the paragraph which immediately follows her statement that she is "a woman," where she locates herself in time with a declaration that it is "Monday" and that "It's been three days since I washed diapers. Or sheets, or a blouse; or myself" (Brossard *TOM* 45). Brossard lists these quotidian, repetitive tasks of washing diapers, bedding, clothes and herself, but simultaneously reveals that she has not done any of them, refusing the tyranny of non-stop housework, even if only for a few days. Instead, she asserts the primacy of her reproductive body by observing,

---

[140] Brossard repeats the phrase again in her 1990 essay, "Poetic Politics," where she writes, "There are words, which, like the body, are irreducible: To write I am a woman is full of consequences" (81).

"Tomorrow, I am menstruating" (45). The following page then continues this contemplation of the corporeal and the female, by observing the vulva of her daughter and the ways in which it conjures her own memories of childhood: "Sensation of a difference. All smooth, all plump, this sex without pubic hair takes me back to childhood. Little girl gradual opening that my daughter recognizes with surprize [sic] as almost her own. Woman-daughter" (46). She emphasizes the interconnection between herself and her daughter in their shared experiences of their bodies, as the daughter functions as a type of mirror in which Brossard's speaker sees herself reflected. She then remarks on the then-popular medical practice of shaving women's vulvas prior to giving birth, observing that "We give birth shaved like a girl who has trafficked with the enemy. Nude hairless pubis… Inside out slit. Hand curious to find itself a little girl again. Nervous tips of fingers. There, as in a flashing likeness, an endless fall through time" (46). The "traffick[ing] with the enemy" is a reference to women's complicity with patriarchal systems of power, through heterosexual and reproductive relationships with men to the historically male-dominated medical establishment. However, there is also masturbatory rebellion woven into Brossard's imagery, as the woman touches herself with "Nervous tips of fingers" and reconnects with her child-self in a moment of "flashing likeness" (46). Within her bodily memories of her childhood self, the speaker also recalls her self-discovery, the camaraderie among young girls and the seeds of rebellion, and then aligns all of this with the act of writing: "alone, as one writes, in the bath room, bending down the head and forehead, spreading the legs a little, *I am in the habit of touching myself,* but to see the difference in myself, finding the girl again with the eyes and the exact memory, this feeling of after school, among girls, agile commandoes, changing our marks on the monthly report" (46). These "agile commandoes" of girls who clandestinely masturbate and alter their grades are refusing the assessments and judgments of a society that seeks to coopt

them into its systems of power. Brossard conjures these girlhood rebellions in order to rekindle the spark of refusal in the grown women they become: “Among girls, smooth like the edges of sleep; revived, women, the hair has grown again, refuse, more than one” (46).

The middle section of the text, titled “Act of the Eye,” contains prose-poems which each begin with quotations from female theorists and writers, including Irigaray, Woolf, Mary Barnes, Monique Wittig and others. They are oblique, dense and complex meditations on patriarchy, feminism and writing as a woman. In the poem “The Act of the Eye on Enamoured Purple In--,” Brossard opens with a quotation from Anais Nin, “I looked with chameleon eyes upon the changing face of the world, looking with anonymous eyes upon my incomplete self,” which she follows with the invocation that “Without delaying inform oneself like a beautiful prolonged truce we have strayed from our field, allured alive. To discern oneself” (56). This act of self-discerning reveals the extent to which women have been led astray from their authentic selves, and Brossard suggests a way back to oneself via lesbian love, domesticity and motherhood. She conjures a domestic morning scene in bed with her lover, pets and child: “Then the morning, very early, when I turn over with the breasts very near and the unsure arms of curled up animals, the girl comes to stretch out between us women because her dreams tells about our flanks about us like a murmur the only one from top to bottom of the house” (56). The co-sleeping family is rendered natural through the presence of animals, and the animal-like phrase “flanks” to describe the women’s bodies. Brossard notes that “The girl with us between the fine sheets is not conventional” but concludes, simply, that they are “Early risers,” awake before the rest of the world and thus ahead of a society that has yet to recognize their existence or acknowledge their legitimacy.

As early twentieth-century texts such as Ann-Marie MacDonald's novel *Adult Onset* and Camilla Gibb's memoir *This is Happy* also make clear, lesbian motherhood and lesbian families are no longer subject to the same erasures, silences or taboos as they were in the 1970s when Brossard first wrote *These Our Mothers.* Contemporary readers of Brossard's early lesbian and feminist texts may thus not fully appreciate just how radical and boundary-defying her auto-theoretical texts were during this era. That Brossard writes so boldly, openly and explicitly about the unique subjectivity of lesbian motherhood—at a time when it was far less socially and culturally acceptable—places her at the vanguard of a specific kind of literary and maternal subjectivity. While earlier texts emerged in Canada that explored lesbian relationships (Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems* from 1965 is a notable antecedent), Brossard was among the first to consider how lesbianism could be mobilized as part of a political project to subvert and refute patriarchal control of women's reproductive lives, and thereby transform the ways in which motherhood is both understood and experienced.

**Claire Harris's *Drawing Down a Daughter* and Discourses of Black Maternal Subjectivity**

Western feminism's long and inexcusable history of racial blindness with respect to the unique experiences and oppressions of Black women has been extensively critiqued by Black feminist theorists since the 1970s, most prominently by Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins. Lorde has observed that "Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power" (117). Furthermore, she argues that white women's willful ignorance of "their built-in privilege of whiteness" and insistence on "defin[ing] *woman* in terms of their own experience alone" result in "women of Color becom[ing] 'other,' the outsider whose experience and

tradition is too 'alien' to comprehend" (Lorde 117). bell hooks likewise asserts that "white women who dominate feminist discourse… rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases" (3). Gloria I. Joseph provides a synopsis of the impact of generations of enduring oppression on Black women, explaining that "the social history of Black women in North America has been one of suffering under severely adverse economic conditions, and today they continue to live under oppressive conditions. By necessity, not choice, Black women have had to be resourceful, assertive, and self-reliant in order to survive" (98-99).

It thus follows that any effective theorization of Black motherhood within dominant feminist discourses must recognize and account for the profound implications of generations of racial and class oppression. Patricia Hill Collins observes that "For women of color, the subjective experience of mothering/motherhood is inextricably linked to the sociocultural concern of racial ethnic communities—one does not exist without the other" ("Shifting" 47). Furthermore, "Centring feminist theorizing on the concerns of white, middle-class women leads to two problematic assumptions," namely that "a relative degree of economic security exists for mothers and their children" and "that all women enjoy the racial privilege that allows them to see themselves primarily as individuals in search of personal autonomy, instead of members of racial ethnic groups struggling for power" (48). Elsewhere, Collins outlines "[t]hree themes implicit in White perspectives on motherhood [that] are particularly problematic for Black women," which include,

> First, the assumption that mothering occurs within the confines of a private, nuclear family household where the mother has almost total responsibility for child-rearing…

> Second, strict sex-role segregation, with separate male and female spheres of influence within the family… [and] Finally, the assumption that motherhood and economic dependency on men are linked and that to be a 'good' mother one must stay at home, making motherhood a full time 'occupation.' ("Meaning" 43-44)

Collins observes that, in reality, "while the idea of the cult of true womanhood has been held up to Black women for emulation, racial oppression has denied Black families sufficient resources to support private, nuclear family households" where the mother remains exclusively in the home (43).[141]

bell hooks also draws attention to the differing experiences and theorization of Black motherhood, observing that "While there are white women activists who may experience family primarily as an oppressive institution… many black women find the family the least oppressive institution. Despite sexism in the context of the family, we may experience dignity, self-worth, and a humanization that is not experienced in the outside world" (38). She further envisions feminism's potential "to end sexist oppression" within the context of the family by "liberat[ing] family so that it could be an affirming, positive kinship structure with no oppressive dimensions based on sex differentiation, sexual preference, etc." (39). hooks draws attention to the "race and class biases" that inflected "the early stages of [the] contemporary women's liberation movement" and notes that "Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not

[141] Collins identifies consistent and enduring African cultural and historical legacies which prioritize "motherhood in religions, philosophies, and social institutions" and address childcare as "a collective responsibility… fostering cooperative, age-stratified, women-centered 'mothering' networks" ("Meaning" 45). She describes the genesis of this "Afrocentric ideology of motherhood" as deriving from "West African perspectives… combin[ing] with the changing political and economic situations framing African-American communities to produce certain enduring themes" (46). Most importantly, "Motherhood, whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother, can be invoked by Black women as a symbol of power" (51). As such, for Black women, "[t]he presence of working mothers, extended family othermothers, and powerful community othermothers offers a range of role models that challenge the tenets of the cult of true womanhood" (53).

have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, lack of jobs, lack of skills or education, a number of other issues would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood" (133). Echoing Collins, hooks observes that "Black women would not have said motherhood prevented us from entering the world of paid work because we have always worked. From slavery to the present day, black women in the U.S. have worked outside the home, in the fields, in the factories, in the laundries, in the homes of others" (133). In contrast to this poorly remunerated and exploitative work, "black women have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing" (133). O'Reilly likewise argues that "there exists a distinct African-American tradition of motherhood" (*Mother* 171) and that this "tradition of motherhood centres upon the recognition that mothering… has cultural and political import, value, and prominence. Motherhood, as a consequence, is a site of power for black women" (172). Furthermore, this perspective on motherhood and work "contrasted sharply with those expressed by white women's liberationists" (hooks 134).

While Collins, hooks, and Lorde all write out of an undeniably American sociohistorical context, it is also equally true that "Black-Canadian feminist thought has been shaped by theorists, activists and feminisms from the United States who speak to the experiences of African-American women and whose works draw on earlier Black feminist founders and scholars" (Wane 33). Jewel Amoah concurs, noting that "Feminist theory in Canada is greatly informed by the struggles and ideologies of women from other countries, including the United States" (106). Notisha Massaquoi similarly asserts that "Black feminists in Canada can not [sic] ignore the reality that our work historically has also been heavily influenced by the theoretical

frameworks of our African American sisters to the south" (11).[142] It is this uniquely Black-Canadian feminist context which informs my reading of Claire Harris's 1992 prose-poetry collection *Drawing Down a Daughter*. Harris's speaker in the collection—like Harris herself—is a Trinidadian emigrant living in Calgary who is in the midst of negotiating the boundaries, both cultural and imaginative, between the land of her birth and her chosen home.[143]

Of her own identity and experience as a Black, Caribbean-Canadian woman and writer, Harris identified an "ambivalent attitude toward black writers in Canada" in an essay commissioned for *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing* (1986), where she notes that "It is true that efforts are being made to include black women in certain aspects of the cultural life of the nation. But it has to be said that after two hundred years in this country, blacks as a group are still seen as newcomers. In Canada, normally so open to immigrants, a blatant ethnocentricity condemns people of color to the sidelines: eternal immigrants forever poised on the verge of not belonging" ("Poets" 115). However, despite this marginalization which leaves Black writers struggling with

---

[142] As Joan Grant Cummings writes in her foreword to *Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspectives on Black Feminist Thought*, "An unbreakable and invisible thread runs through us. Within Canada, Black women all share a 'diaspora' status" and unfortunately, part of this unity is the fact that "at some juncture within Canadian society, we all have to confront at the minimum that dynamic combination of anti-Black racism and racialized sexism in one of its many nuanced faces" (xiii). Roberta K. Timothy notes that "The struggle for an African/Black identity in a society like Canada's—a white settler colonial country, indoctrinated, developed, and maintained on colonial legacies—is a complex issue for members of African/Black communities" that is inflected by a series of "intersectional factors such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, and age" and ultimately determined by "actively examining and choosing constructs that reflect the socio-historical-political individual and collective experiences and realities" (155-156). In the introduction to the same volume, Massaquoi argues that "A feminist theory which is grounded in the specific materiality of Black women's lives in Canada must acknowledge the need for a transnational feminist practice as a framework, one which can incorporate an understanding of the global economic and political upheaval which results in the movement of Black women across borders" (7). This liminality and transcendence of borders is echoed by Jewel Amoah, who notes that "an understanding of Canadian Black Feminist Theory necessitates an understanding of what it is to straddle two (or more) worlds, ideologies, and consciousnesses" (105).

[143] Of the strengths of Caribbean-Canadian women, Yvonne Bobb-Smith writes that they are able "to disentangle themselves from the quagmire of oppressions, and cope with the challenges of living in Canada, a country far from 'home'" by exercising their agency, which in their experience "is a derivative of learned resistance" (55). This "resistance… provided them with a set of cultural and political responses to everyday life experiences in which oppression, domination, and exploitation had an impact on their lives" (Bobb-Smith 56).

a denial of their legitimacy (115), Harris asserts that they "also share with feminists the recognition that poetry, like other arts, plays a political as well as a healing role in the life of a people, through the images of the self that art provides" (118).

In the existing literary criticism, analysis of Harris's work and impact is frequently aligned with that of Dionne Brand and M. Nourbese Philip, all of whom "write about their position as women, as lovers, wives, mothers, daughters, women at work" (Hunter 259). Their work is perceived as being "deeply rooted within… the modernist poetic, whose purpose is already to fracture the conventional discourses and to construct different connections and communications" (260). I argue that among the key discourses that *Drawing Down a Daughter* seeks to "fracture" and re-construct are those of the mother-writer and Black maternal subjectivity. Collins similarly affirms the importance of literary self-expression in explorations of Black motherhood, observing that "Personal narratives, autobiographical statements, poetry, fiction, and other personalized statements have all been used by women of color to express self-defined standpoints on mothering and motherhood" ("Shifting" 48).

Born in Trinidad, Claire Harris immigrated to Canada in 1966 after graduating from University College, Dublin and completing post-graduate work at the University of the West Indies (Williams "Interview" 42). She settled in Calgary, where she taught English and Drama in the Catholic school system for almost thirty years (Williams "Interview" 42; Casas 33). She only began publishing poetry in the 1980s, after which she became quite prolific and widely acclaimed. *Drawing Down a Daughter*, her fifth collection, is a multi-layered prose-poem with nested narratives and a series of interrelated protagonists. The main speaker is Patricia, a writer who is heavily pregnant with her first child, a daughter, to whom many of the poems are addressed. She is also embroiled in a conflict with her husband, who wants to move back to

Trinidad after the baby is born despite Patricia's feelings of reluctance. The collection is characterized by frequent slippages among various female speakers. Emily Allen Williams aptly describes *Drawing* as "a synthesis/collage of poetry, prose, dream talk, letters, as well as a creative synthesis of these" ("Interview" 44). And while Patricia's subjectivity comprises the principle framework and ur-narrative, and we frequently witness her sitting down to write precisely those other lyric- and prose-poems that make up *Drawing*, we are invited into these alternate imaginative spaces which are a pastiche of memory and conjuring, recalling stories told by her great-aunt, and one cautionary folktale in particular about a young couple in Trinidad, Jocelyn and Burri. There are additional parallels between Patricia, Jocelyn, and another woman, Enid Thomas, who Patricia imagines as a version of Jocelyn brought to life in Calgary, all of their narratives sharing common themes and experiences of pregnancy, motherhood, emigration, and fears of abandonment and loss. Teresa Zackodnik observes that *Drawing Down a Daughter* functions "to question culturally constructed notions of 'the mother' and the experience of motherhood" (165).

The text also has prominent meta-fictional elements: Patricia is often sitting down to write the very poems and narratives that we are reading. In fact, "on more than one public occasion, [Harris] has said that parts of *Drawing*—all the dreams except one, the story about Burri, the memories of her mother and Great Aunt's stories—are 'true.' She has even said of the book that it is her life" (Rudy n.pag.). However, while Harris and Patricia share this common literary vocation and some biographical details, it is noteworthy that "Harris has never married, and she has no child" (n.pag.). Furthermore, of all the authors whose work is included in this dissertation, Harris is unique in being the only one who is not a mother herself. In trying to decode the similarities between Harris and Patricia, Susan Rudy notes that they are both

immigrants to Canada from Trinidad, they teach and write and engage in "complex analysis of racism in Canadian culture" (n.pag.). As such, the identities of Harris and her poet-protagonist simultaneously merge and diverge from one another, a process that Rudy describes as "reconfigur[ing] the relation of presence to autobiography and ask[ing] us to imagine it, not as coincidental with the anterior existence of the author, with what is known of her life, but as a liminal space in which the autobiography corresponds with—in the sense of writing back and forth to… the writer's 'life'" (n.pag.).[144] I argue that in the context of the maternal subjectivity which the text enacts and articulates, there is an analogous multiplicity and fragmentation of voice. Harris may have one, central, maternal poet-protagonist, but in weaving it through and around these alternative maternal narratives, she refuses any simple, homogenous singularity of Black motherhood, but captures instead the variety and heterogeneity of maternal discourse and experience. Williams describes the polyphony of these "various forms of address" as "conveying the multiplicity of feelings within the mother" (*Poetic* 63). Zackodnik likewise argues that in *Drawing,* "Harris theorizes maternal subjectivity and geographies of 'home' as shifting and polyvalent" (163) and "represents the maternal experience itself as one of self-difference, as one in which the mother we fantasize as an ideal of wholeness perhaps experiences a heightened sense of her alterity or divided subjectivity" (165).[145] Further expanding on the liminality which Rudy and Zackodnik detect in Harris's text, the fact that the mother-poet is pregnant allows her to occupy yet another in-between space, between childless-ness and motherhood. Pregnancy is

---

[144] Rudy goes on to suggest that "*Drawing Down a Daughter* is written at and out of the margin of the material, in the liminal spaces, at the selvage of consciousness" and that it represents a multiplicity of identities or subjectivities: "Harris's subjectivity speaks in many persons, including the "i" (the edge of self… constructed in early childhood); the "I" (that self which is…made possible by the language within which it speaks); the "she," who watches, records, analyses, writes, lives, showers, eats, breathes; and the double-embedded "I" of the Great Aunt, who speaks in dialect and… is drawn out of the past and into the present" (n.pag.).

[145] Zackodnik also observes that "Harris's text is a collage of prose and poetry that transgresses boundaries of genre, as its speaker shifts between and re-negotiates subject positions, national boundaries, and cultures" (163).

an embodiment and representation of liminality—one is about-to-become a mother, has developed protective and maternal feelings for the fetus within, but has not yet gone through childbirth, held the child in her arms or experienced the baby outside the confines of her own body. Nonetheless, I argue that Harris's narrator, Patricia, can best be understood as a mother-in-process who expresses a fragmentary, polyvocal and shifting maternal subjectivity.

In addition, Patricia is a writer who conjures memories, captures folktales from her native Trinidad and writes poems addressed directly to her unborn daughter. In this sense, Harris presents motherhood and artistic creation as two harmonious, productive undertakings. As Sunanda Pal notes,

> In patriarchal thought, maternity and creativity has generally been considered to exclude each other. Whereas creativity of the mind has been associated with men, creativity for women has been associated with procreation. By uniting creation with procreation, Harris employs the childbirth metaphor at two levels. At one level it is about her experience of pregnancy, an experience which only a woman can articulate, at another level it is also about a black woman poet giving birth to poetry. The childbirth metaphor hence signifies the birth of a black female discourse. (140)

Dannabang Kuwabong argues similarly that Harris "construct[s] authoritative matrilineages" in order to "articulate" an identity as a "creative writer," which is "a profession that is sometimes associated with mothering" (111). He goes on to note that "African and Afrisporic women writers have caused a rethinking of the… separation between creative writing and raising children" and in rejecting this inescapably Western, cultural dichotomy, have "create[d] a

conducive atmosphere for the construction of a poetic of matrilineage through positive archetypal mother figures" (111-112).[146]

The opening section of *Drawing Down a Daughter,* entitled "The Gathering," immediately establishes the primacy of matrilineage and the maternal in the text, where the speaker recounts a dream wherein she returns to her childhood home in Trinidad to find that it is dark and damp and her mother is waiting inside: "I find her my mother waiting at the window / in grey & lilac flowers I remember from childhood / I sit on the edge of a bed where dreams clot" (7). The "clotting" of dreams on the edge of the bed is reminiscent of blood, either that of menstruation or lochia. The speaker implores her mother to leave behind the "rotting" house, as the mother merely "stares" back at her daughter, "ominous through threatening glass" (Harris *Drawing* 8). The dream concludes with the mother turning away from the daughter, and a book the daughter is holding flies from her grasp: "she turns / the book leaps from my hands pages rattle in reluctant / flight" (8). In contrast to the mother's imprisonment in the now-derelict family home, the speaker's literary ambitions—as emblematized in the book leaping from her hands—literally take flight. And while the speaker reveals that she "wake[s] hunted curled around a small doubt," she also immediately reaches for the notebook within which she has been writing poems for her daughter while simultaneously stroking her pregnant belly: "I reach for your note book / stroke the soft belly: Baby we journey down dreamlines / alone" (8). This sense of unity between creativity and procreativity is mirrored in the connection the mother feels for the daughter within. And while the speaker reveals that the father of the child wants to find somewhere to live in the Caribbean to raise his family, as he "searches islands 'a safe place for / this daughter!,'" it is also made clear that the mother has already made up her

[146] Karen T. Craddock argues similarly that "the power of storytelling" can be understood as "a vehicle to understand identi[t]y and resistance in analyses of the Black maternal voice in literary fiction" (8).

mind, declaring: “Girl you’ll be born here” (8). She reveals that she is seeking a matrilineage within (or against) which to position her own burgeoning maternal subjectivity and that she can, in turn, bequeath to her daughter, reflecting that she has been “dreaming the mother / dreaming myself dreaming / the mother” (8). It is a “dream / potent as love / or hate” and “helpless  as a daughter / still” (8). These complex and interwoven renderings of the mother-daughter bond comprise the legacy which Harris’s speaker passes on to her daughter: “all for this your birthgift Child who / opens me” (8).The opening the child creates is both physical and psychological, through the materiality of birth and the new subjectivity that motherhood engenders. The dreams themselves are also conjured as a kind of birth as well, as the speaker reflects that “the dream is a caul / breathless  called / out of darkness” (9).

The conclusion of the dream also signals a metafictional shift in point of view, as if the opening occasioned by the child creates an unbearable exposure and vulnerability, as the speaker remarks, “I prefer the third / person” (9). This destabilizing of the singularity of the first person has been theorized as a strategic positionality for Black writers, as Zackodnik notes that “Harris and many other women writers in the African diaspora see black women’s subjectivity as defined by a shifting, rather than rooted, sense of identity” (170). This “dislocation of place and identity” is both “part of diaspora” and “is also the radical aspect of black women’s subjectivity” (Zackodnik 170). Zackodnik further relates this shift to pregnancy itself, as she argues that “the speaker’s alternation between first and third person in *Drawing Down a Daughter* is also an exploration of the way pregnancy and the maternal body may affect a woman’s sense of wholeness” (173-174). And indeed, in the moments after awakening from the dream, as the speaker struggles with fear and restlessness, she feels her unborn child moving within her: “restless / the child slides into  kicks out  again  again!  again! / oh!” (10). She imagines

her daughter longing to be released from her uterine confinement: "a wish to be free  shape that is not  shape wisp in / the corner  an eye" (10). The contours of the baby's body, faintly felt from within, a "shape that is not  shape," evokes the liminality of the fetal life within—alive but not yet born. The speaker then honours and anticipates the transformation that is forthcoming through birth-giving, as she says "her prayer before the goddess devouring her  a murmur / head **down**" (10). The baby as both deity and devourer is being entreated by the mother to assume the ideal position for its impending birth, as the speaker continues to insist: "head **down** / head **down** / head **down** / **down  down  down dow…**" (11). This downward positionality is interspersed with images and renderings of liquidity:

> restless
>
> rush  suck  shu-a  lap  shua-shuashu
>
> a shu-a  shua  suck  shu-a  rush  shu-a ashuash
>
> shuash shu  and ash (11)

The onomatopoeia of water in motion gestures simultaneously to the recurrent images of water throughout the collection. Along with the amniotic fluid of pregnancy, within which the baby is suspended, the sounds also echo that of a fetal ultrasound and the whooshing of the baby's heartbeat. Of the pregnant speaker, Harris writes, "she is an ocean" and of the child within, "waterbaby" (Harris *Drawing* 11). The maternal voice then interjects, insisting on the child not getting too comfortable floating within: "Girl  i ain't no lily pad!" (11).[147]

---

[147] The invocation of water also aligns with Harris's frequent mentions of both the Bow River in Calgary and the Lopinot River in Trinidad throughout the collection, with which "the speaker is connected spiritually and physically" (Beckford 196). Beckford argues that "[t]he river as a motif of life and time symbolizes also the boundary between life and death" (196). Furthermore, "In Harris's narrative, the river is a motif for life, time, and change" (196). Beckford connects the symbolism of the river with both Christian imagery and the Demeter/Persephone myth, suggesting that Harris is seeking to merge these two spiritual modes: "By creating a hybrid of these myths, Harris is speaking of a new creation, of a new existence of characters and lived realities that bring the Caribbean and Canada together in a shared space. This is the new 'sacred' ground in which the myths that Harris uses must be understood" (196).

She falls back asleep and re-enters the dreamscape which opened the collection. It is a melange of images and sensations of contractions and giving birth, her own mother, the cold, Calgary winter and the sensuous details of Trinidad. She is "swallow[ed]" by "the dream" and "enters fable laid like / a table" and sees "lace / curtains  cane rockers  mother  let me mummy  ma / show you" (13). She is once again the daughter in her mother's house, but this time a small child herself. She then transforms and "the girl disappears" leaving the now-adult speaker and her mother "alone on a / dim street  light splashing from torches  mother ma…" (13). The unfinished address to her own mother signals a yearning towards her own matrilineage, as she is thrown immediately into her own process of birth-giving and transformation into a mother herself: as "she thrashes contracting" and finds herself "clinging to night" amidst "this pain / as to a raft that is not / words" (13). The wordlessness of the pain gives way to a swirl of imagery of the flora and fauna of Trinidad until finally, an "old old woman steps  scattering / words sentences paragraphs drawing down a daughter / she scrambles after" (14). The "drawing down a daughter" from which the title is taken becomes both a literal birth-giving but also, amidst the "scattering" of "words sentences paragraphs," also the act of *writing* to and about the daughter to-be-born. It is simultaneously a maternal and a literary/artistic subjectivity.

It is also revealed to be a maternal and artistic subjectivity that is in some peril, as we discover that the speaker's husband wants to leave Calgary and return to Trinidad once the baby is born, even though the speaker is reluctant at the prospect. Once she awakens from her second dream and "looks down at her body as if surprised" to find herself pregnant, she addresses her daughter directly to tell her, "are you there Girl / your daddy's looking to find a safe place / for your childhood" (15). She fears she will eventually give in to his desire to move, as the poem once again switches tenses and reveals her inner ruminations: "she won't be able to hold out

she thinks of teaching  the / career she's built  her writing  Child if he hauls us home / your collage may never be published" (15). The "collage" is the poetry collection she is currently working on, and she fears that she will be unable to continue writing, publishing and teaching if she returns to Trinidad. At these prospects she feels "such a weight about her heart" and a "stone in her throat / no threat of happiness" (15). However, she maintains her resistance to the idea, represented in the following lines which are concretized in the contour of a pregnant belly:

for
her
self
for
the
child
roped
in
her
womb
she
refuses (16)

The primacy of the maternal body continues on the opposing page, this time with sparse lyrics spread over two sequential convexities that appear to be breasts as viewed from either above or below:

**She rises**
going
out to
day that existed
in/ and
before
her body

her body
day's
memory
of it illusive
imprint
waiting for
her nakedness (17)

Just as in the poetry from Chapter Three, which focuses on the corporeality of motherhood, here Harris conjures the fertile, maternal body as a source of power and strength, beginning with the bolded declaration that "**She rises**" into a day that awaits "her nakedness" (17). Like Irigaray, Harris's invocation of the female body, with her repetition of "her body / her body," a doubling that mirrors the two breasts depicted on the page, is a reclamation of feminine strength and power. The bolded "**She rises**" also appears to echo Maya Angelou's 1978 poem of Black female power, "Still I Rise."

The significance of being a racialized woman in Canada is more explicitly emphasized in the stanza which follows, where she feels her daughter move within her and reveals her ambivalence at bringing a Black child into a racist world:

inside her the child thrashing
daughter she needs
dreads
for who would bring a child
skin shimmering black God's
night breath curled crisp
about her face courage
of enslaved ancestors in her eyes

who would choose to cradle such tropic

grace on the Bow's frozen banks (17-18)

She reveals the simultaneity of her desire to have a child and her fear of the racism her child will face. While she revels in the beauty of her daughter's "skin shimmering black" and the strength exemplified in the "courage / of enslaved ancestors in her eyes", she also questions the extent to which her daughter will belong in this new country, wondering at her own choice "to cradle such tropic / grace on the Bow's frozen banks" (18). She juxtaposes the warmth of the "tropics" against the cold Bow river of Calgary, and in this geographic imagining, also captures her own and her husband's conflicted feelings over raising her child in Canada instead of Trinidad. She legitimates her husband's desire to move the family to Trinidad by drawing on the history of slavery, acknowledging that "this man / fleeing racism as his body must once / have fled the coffle" (18).

To assuage her sense of unease and dislocation, she "then hastens to her notebooks / hand on a belly that flutters / pierced by tenderness  she is / for a moment  holy" (19). Harris renders the mother-writer sacred, using one hand to write in her notebooks while her other hand rests on her belly and the child moving within. The moment of creation is captured in a lyric poem that appears in a different font, indicating the poem-within-the-poem that our speaker is in the process of writing: "a breath of wind  or hope / stirs the quiet room / sunlight invests leaves / of her nameless one" (19). She writes of her dreams for her unborn child, captured in the sunlight, quiet, wind and hope she conjures on the page. She addresses her daughter again: "Girlchild  i wish you something to be passionate / about  someone to be passionate with  a father for instance / natural opponent of any right thinking girl" (23). She reveals her wish to cultivate a rebellious and subversive spirit in her daughter, recognizing that while she will have important

and deep relationships with men in her life, it is essential that she develop a firm and oppositional sense of self as a woman.

She reflects to her daughter, “Girl we’ve read / all the right books” and then “she strokes her belly” again (24). She affirms and celebrates her Blackness, as she

lifts the Great Mask to her shoulders  covers

her body with its bleached grass skirts

holding out her arms she sings from *Solomon*

‘Yes  you are black! and radiant (24)

This connection to the African continent is reinforced with the speaker’s reflection that “she thinks of Africa / she should have insisted on Yoruba” for a language to bequeath her daughter, as “she goes back to cold news  the tea  the notebook” and

she writes:

Daughter  there is no language

i can offer you  no corner that is

yours  unsullied

you inherit the intransitive

case  Anglo-Saxon noun (24)

Harris highlights the disconnection her Black protagonist feels from the dominant, European language within which she must function and which is the only linguistic legacy she has to leave her daughter. She continues, addressing her daughter again, “Child  all i have to give / is English which hates/fears your / black skin” (25). Harris grapples with the problematic relationship a Black writer has with the oppressive and racist legacy of the language of the colonizer, and how this linguistic heritage is inevitably passed down to subsequent generations.

In response, however, Harris advocates for resistance through joy, literature and pride. Despite the "English which hates/fears your / black skin," she exhorts her daughter to

> make it
>
> d
>
> a c
>
> n e
>
> s
>
> i g
>
> to sunlight in the Caribbean (25)

The concretization of the words "dance" and "sing" across the page are a playful emblem of what the speaker wishes for her daughter, while the syntax of the lyric also creates a double meaning of the "it" which is dancing and singing—both her Black skin and language itself. This aligns with what both Harris and her poet-speaker are doing with the English language in their work, using the language of the colonizer to express and enact Black empowerment.

Later, as she ventures onto the balcony and takes in the view of the Bow river, she recalls scenes from her childhood and "her mother mad straightening over- / turned furniture… with a whispered / furious tirade" followed by "silent impossible demands," in response to which the speaker vows to her daughter to be different:

> she whispers:
>
> Girl i'm not going to make your grandmother's
>
> mistakes no no
>
> i'm gonna make a whole
>
> new bunch of my own
>
> the most we can hope
>
> kid is a primal mesh
>
> occasionally take it from me daughterhood expert (32)

The speaker acknowledges her maternal lineage and legacy, which includes her mother's anger at her own oppressive domestic spaces, but she chooses instead to forge a bold, new path for herself and her daughter. She expresses her hopes and desires for her daughter's future, addressing her directly:

> O my darling daughter
>
> my little fish  swim[148]
>
> fiercely into life
>
> its monotony
>
> its dailiness  & i
>
> shall armour you
>
> in love
>
> and it will be almost enough (41)

She celebrates both the power and the limitations of maternal love and care, acknowledging that however much she may love her child, she cannot shield her from all of the inevitable pain of living. Later, she reiterates her maternal limitations when she writes,

> **Daughter**  to live is to dream the self
>
> to make a fiction
>
> this telling i begin
>
> you stranded in landscape of your time
>
> will redefine  shedding my tales
>
> to grow your own (43)

[148] Like Thesen, Harris also employs themes of water and marine life—analogous with amniotic fluid—to conjure and imagine the existence of her unborn child.

She reveals the extent to which each person constructs and narrativizes themselves, subject to the sociohistorical conditions within which they live, either embracing or casting off their inheritances along the way.

Harris's speaker dedicates the middle section of the text, which consists of the embedded narrative of Burri and Jocelyn told by a matriarchal storyteller in Trinidad, to her unborn daughter. This blurring of the various narrative and generic modes, according to Maria Caridad Casas, opens up imaginative space for the unborn, black daughter, as "the storyteller-protagonist-narrator becomes the Creator, and this transposition is what allows the pregnant mother to open up a space of possibility for her daughter's viable existence in the world as female and black" (37). Before she begins to write, she situates herself and her daughter together on "this bank of the Bow" with a "white sky / arching over us" and "white snow below" as she explains that, "i write this tale for you  Daughter  this account" (48). She reaffirms her pride in her Blackness and her Trinidadian heritage as she invites her daughter to accompany her

> as we enter
>
> pure space of being
>
> moving to what is
>
> radiant  black
>
> where we can be  truly (48)

She reminds her,

> Girlchild we wear a skin
>
> sleek
>
> sassy
>
> tough

sinuous

black n brown (49)

and celebrates

our indomitable

secret self

free

in the spirit pool

out of which we are (49)

Immediately following the story of Burri and Jocelyn (who is newly pregnant with Burri's child, and who Burri now plans to leave, not wanting to be burdened with a child), Harris returns to our pregnant speaker, who "stands in darkness under the shower / as once long ago she stood under Lopinot Falls / her head thrown back to the moon" (67). This connection to Trinidad and the cycles of the moon transitions to a contemplation of her pregnant body, as "her huge belly gleams under the shower  heaves / she is fascinated by this expanse of brown / curving  by the bump which suddenly appears" (68). As the child moves within her, she draws strength from her pregnancy, and just as she wishes to empower her daughter, she finds her daughter empowering her: "baby thrashes out  bump / disappears  empowered by her daughter / she grows strong" (68).

This strength becomes necessary as she argues with her husband about moving to Trinidad in the prose section which follows. She resists the idea that he has become determined to pursue, telling him, "I'll never get a job teaching at home. And I can't write there!" (71). He tries to soothe her, advising her that her father has already lined up a teaching job for her and that they will be able to afford domestic help, replying, "If you want to work, you can. There'll be the

baby, though… you'll have the help we couldn't really afford her [sic]. You'll be able to write as much as you want" (71). They leave the discussion unresolved, and the tension between the couple persists and permeates the poems that follow. As he leaves the following morning to go to work, he asks her to let him know right away if her labour starts, insisting, "If anything happens beep me. Don't try to be a feminist!" (75). In response, "She draws the covers over her head" and then inwardly expresses her irritation to her unborn child: "Daughter  i'm going to keep this father for you / as long as i can  but don't count on it" (75). After she gets out of bed, she observes that "the child is very quiet  gathering strength" and tells her, "Girl it's time  we can separate now / she pats her stomach  strolls around the apartment" (75). As she wanders around her home, she continues to address her daughter, telling her "this is home" where she and her husband continue to create "tiny / slivers of story / spin it into threads  for your tale / your discreet herstory" (75). The feminist neologism "herstory" functions as a direct repudiation of her husband's earlier warning to her not to "try to be a feminist" (75). The speaker is determined that her daughter be strong and assert her equal rights: "(she slaps her tummy) / that Kid is so you learn to question / everything  especially 'love'" (75-76).

In the final third of the collection, Harris's speaker begins to feel the first contractions of labour. She is putting away dishes in the kitchen "when pain grabs her" and

> she gasps surprise
>
> fear  stands there reluctant
>
> overwhelmed  forgetting
>
> everything she has learnt (79)

As the "pain ebbs on its own curve / she understands suddenly / that she is possessed" (79). The speaker suddenly recognizes her own powerlessness in the face of her body's biological process

of birth-giving, and after pulling her overnight bag into the hallway and writing down the time of this first contraction, she sits down at her desk to write: "she writes madly  an hour has passed / nothing else  now she knows what it is / to be scared to death" (79). The soon-to-be mother finds solace from and expression of her fear in her creative writing, and Harris includes the poem that her speaker is writing, once again inviting us into the act of artistic creation: "she writes: / my hour on this page distorts everything / words and art / make  beauty where there is none" (79). Even as she begins her own process of labour, she takes time to reflect on its broader meaning and experience, contemplating "the wonder  the glory / of birth  this painful  messy / business  this animal function / before us" (79).[149]

The collection closes on the speaker's rapidly progressing labour. Her husband is now in bed with her as "She wakes to find him watching her" and he asks, "okay?" (Harris *Drawing* 109). While "she nods" and acknowledges that "he means well," inwardly she thinks, "but how okay can / you be carrying thirty pounds about the middle / thirty kicking pounds" (109). He proudly declares, "my woman!" as "she struggles up in bed  the child low  heavy" (109) and "she is thinking of all his 'my' / as if he had somehow acquired her  for all time" (109). She defiantly asserts her autonomy by declaring inwardly that "she's still herself's / on loan to her daughter  to him / as they were on loan to her" (109). Suddenly, the next contraction crashes over her, more intense than the ones before:

---

[149] In a nod to her own matrilineage, Harris's speaker recalls her aunt telling her about her own birth. In remembering this story of her own birth, she declares courageously to her daughter, "life is all risk! / Daughter  go ye and do likewise!" (*Drawing* 80). This invocation to "do likewise" is at once a call to bravery and to bearing her own children one day. She also conjures memories of this same aunt who delivered her and followed Trinidadian traditions in the days that followed, recounting that "she put / my navel string in a bottle, carried it to the family barracks / at Lopinot to bury" (80). She contemplates what the reactions of her Canadian doctor (and husband) would be, musing to her daughter, "i wonder what the doctor would say if i / asked him for yours  what would your father say so thorough / a Canadian" (80). She then aligns herself firmly with her daughter in both gender and national heritage, observing of her husband in bolded type, "**he doesn't really know anything about us**" (80), but conceding that "we're going to have to teach him, you and i" (80).

it rips through her so suddenly

shaking her

flinging her

breathless

against cliffs (111)

and afterwards, “she lies limp” as “he phones the doctor  calls the hospital” (111).

She gets up and goes to look out the balcony window at the winter landscape of Calgary at dawn, and thinks again of her child who is about to be born and addresses her: “daughter there are sundrifts  now as in a dream / your face drifts too  just out of sight / though we are roped to each other” (112). She imagines the materiality of her new daughter and her new identity as a mother and it motivates her through her labour: “i picture your hair sprung black brushing my chin / delicate as spiders / it incites me” (112). She can already envision her daughter’s strength and independence, as she continues,

i imagine your hands

easily your father’s perfect half-moon nails

grasp the air casually taking your own self back

as if all my striving to order existence with your birth

were less even than this view (112)

Her daughter will gain her own sense of herself as an autonomous person, separate from her mother and father. And while the mother tries to “order existence,” this is a futile proposition, as the daughter will inevitably come into her own selfhood.

The poem concludes on a final, intense contraction that accompanies the sunrise, as “the sun gathers wings  draws back his blade / morning bleeds into the river” (112). The violent

imagery of a sharp blade cutting through a morning which bleeds into the river represents the pain of labour, along with blood and fluidity. She can feel the child within her, as "inside you thrash out  i hug my belly in the helpless dawn" (112). She is carried along with the progress of her labour, helpless to stop it or ease her suffering. She likens the pain and powerlessness of the experience to the oppression of slavery, remarking in the final two lines that "for a moment i am / as the stunned slave under the whip" (112). Elizabeth Podnieks has argued that Harris's concluding lines suggest the extent to which the maternal body remains a colonized body ("Matrifocal"), while Zackodnik interprets the use of slavery as a metaphor for childbirth in a text that otherwise empowers and celebrates the maternal body as revelatory of "[t]he ambivalence the mother-speaker feels toward both her unborn child and her role as nurturer" which "are further reflected in her contradictory characterizations of her pregnancy as both a 'gift' and enslavement of her body" (176). However, "[a]s she does throughout this collection, Harris resists here resolving what is problematic and contradictory. This mother experiences childbirth as at once both a willing gift of her body to her child's needs and an enslavement of that body" (Zackodnik 176). Zackodnik concludes that while "Harris evokes her foremothers' enslaved bodies in her poetry, recalling their suffering," she is also "locating hope for future generations in the continued remembrance of the history the body offers as its text" (166). Of the final lines of the collection, Pal likewise observes that "[t]hough the last line… underscores [the speaker's] vulnerability on account of race and gender, the child born will have a chance to emerge as a new self-defined black Canadian woman" (140).

Harris's *Drawing Down a Daughter* asserts a bold, independent and creative Black maternal subjectivity, as we witness the speaker's literary and artistic processes amid her approaching labour. Rather than positioning creativity and maternity in opposition, Harris unites

the two endeavours, as her speaker not only addresses her daughter directly in her work, but chronicles her own experiences of pregnancy and labour. She draws power from her pregnancy and seeks to impart this sense of empowerment and strength to her unborn daughter.[150] And while Harris's speaker acknowledges that racism is pervasive in her chosen home of Canada, she resists her husband's desire to return to Trinidad to raise their daughter, a place she recalls as being personally stifling and confining. She prefers instead her independence and autonomy, away from the entanglements of her family of origin. Harris's mother-poet claims and inhabits her space on the shores of Calgary's Bow River, asserting her presence and individuality, and writing her way through the beginning stages of labour. As she prepares to give birth to her daughter, she conjures a Black maternal subjectivity that is dynamic, brave and generative. She draws strength from her maternal identity and incorporates it into her literary practice, modeling for her almost-born daughter how to be a powerful Black woman who resists and pushes back against both the patriarchal and racial oppressions of her lived experience.

**Combatting Maternal Erasure: Fiona Tinwei Lam's *Enter the Chrysanthemum***

On writing as a mother, Vancouver-based poet Fiona Tinwei Lam has observed that "To write, mothers have to combat the continual erasure and submersion that mothering entails: the submersion of needs, ambitions, identity, and the erasure of privacy and personal boundaries. To reappear as a writer required a carving out of a mental and emotional space for oneself through time away from mothering, to be free to dream, read, and then eventually write" ("Elements" 89). Lam explores her maternal experience in her 2009 collection, *Enter the Chrysanthemum*,

[150] As Collins notes, Black women's texts often reveal "the multiple strategies Black mothers employ in preparing their daughters for the demands of being Black women in oppressive conditions" ("Meaning" 55).

with poems that focus on a variety of themes, including single motherhood, the exhaustion of the early months with a newborn, her own childhood memories, the death of her father, the decline of her own mother into dementia and the artistic matrilineage of which she is a part. As a second-generation East Asian-Canadian writer whose parents immigrated from Hong Kong, Lam also incorporates elements of her familial and cultural heritage in her work. Her maternally-themed poems actively combat the self-erasure that Lam identifies as being a part of motherhood, chronicling the exhaustion, struggle and self-doubt involved in nurturing a baby and small child. She acknowledges the loneliness of single motherhood, as her relationship with her son's father falters and fades, and yet identifies the multitudinous moments of joy among the difficulties she faces. She also subtly positions her own creativity as part of a matrilineage with a number of references to her own mother's visual artistry. The mother-artist Lam conjures in her poetry is not inured against the sorrow and pain that motherhood often brings, but asserts in their stead her vision, strength and vibrancy.

The poems are structured along a narrative arc with the same speaker, beginning with childhood memories of her mother's paintings and her father's death. This is followed by the second section of the collection which focuses more intently on maternal experience and opens with the speaker and her partner going for a walk together for the first time after she has given birth to their child. "Eleventh Avenue" begins with the couple leaving the house "Hand in hand" on "my first day back from hospital" (28). They are "Together alone" finally, but both physically scarred, as they "hobbled out of the house" and are beset by "newly seamed aches— / you with your ripped knee, / me with a wrenched, emptied womb" (28). They are supporting each other through this new transition into parenthood, as "We steadied each other / as if we'd just arisen from disbelief / after a year of reeling through desire's tectonics" (28). The original desire which

gave rise to the earth-shaking "tectonic" changes of pregnancy and childbirth has changed them irrevocably, as they take their "First steps along scarred sidewalks / toward what we'd become" (28). They are still caught in a liminal state of transformation, birth having transformed their identities and their relationship, but they have yet to psychologically catch up to the ramifications of these changes. Lam likens this state to a wedding for them, noting that "This was our aisle, the only one / I would know with you. / Without trumpets or processional" (28). The couple finds themselves on "That February day" on "the cusp, / sky austere with dusk, / a light rain anointing us all" (28). In returning to their home after their 'wedding-walk' together, they are initiated into their new parental roles: "We returned—a father, a mother / to our son" (28).

In "Colic," Lam highlights the crippling exhaustion and relentless caregiving of mothering a colicky newborn. The poem takes on the second-person perspective, instantly creating a dissociative point of view, an objectification of the mother being gazed upon by herself: "You hold him. Hold him against your stained T-shirt" (29). The speaker is now two months postpartum, and yet "At two months he still moans, writhes in his sleep" (29). The relentless litany of routines repeated through a fog of exhaustion is captured in an italicized list of actions and objects: "*breast bottle soother pacing swaddling swinging lullabies / chamomile gripe-water hugging rubbing pacing patting rocking*" (29). All of this effort, however, is to no avail, as the speaker observes of the mother that "You've wobbled through weeks of this, ready to fall / through your stitches onto the floor or the street" (29). The threatened bodily disintegration, particularly through the speaker's postpartum stitches, reflects the mother's state of emotional and psychological collapse, particularly when there is no foreseeable end or solution: "The experts advise what you already know. / No antidote. How can you sleep / when

his sleep is agony?" (29). Further compounding the new mother's feelings of helplessness is her attendant loneliness, as "the baby's father, when he's there, / broods on the outskirts of love" (29). He is not always present and when he is, he is not the loving, attentive partner she needs. Regardless of the solitude she feels, the new mother carries on with her physically demanding mothering, repeating again the strung-together itemization of activities and objects involved in caregiving: "*breast rocking pacing swaddling chamomile lullabies / pacing gripe-water rocking swinging singing pacing*" (29). In the final two lines, she recognizes that the only course of action available is to wait: "You wait it out. All you can do— / keep vigil" (29). The vigil the new mother keeps is paradoxical, associated as it is with death and dying, and yet also signaling a transitional state. In the acknowledgment of this transition is the understanding that there will be another state of being on the other side, and all that is required to reach it is a patient attentiveness.

A series of four poems which follow sequentially, "Beach," "Ablution," Glass" and "Park" all chronicle various scenes of parental failure, evidenced variously in the child's discontent, the physical environment, the mother's continuous exhaustion and broken glass scattered across the kitchen floor. What unifies the four poems further is the fact that they feature only mother and child alone together, locked in dyadic relationship borne of the speaker's single-motherhood. In "Beach," the mother and child are at the seashore, reminiscent of Thesen's beach scenes in "Marine Life, 1970." What should be a joyful day together instead results in disappointment and unhappiness. Rather than collecting seashells and encountering sea-creatures, the mother and child find themselves "Foraging for treasure in summer's ruins: / cigarette butts, broken shells, a blackened match" (32). The ocean is neither inviting nor appealing, described instead as a "murky sluice of water, thick / with matted seaweed, / yellow

foam" (32). The child is "grim-faced" and the mother observes of her son that "The waves make you cry" and when he encounters sand castles made by other children, "you topple them all, / trudge away" (32).

The poem which follows, "Ablution," marks an abrupt shift from summer to winter, where the speaker has made a "snow family" complete with "hats, gloves, carrot noses" (33). However, following "A two day deluge" (33) of rain, the "snow family" and its component parts are now left "strewn / in shrinking grey mush" with "Everything / running in the gutters" (33). All this work, "The proud pathways shovelled out" have been "for nothing" (33). The family she imagined into life has been washed away by the vicissitudes of the natural world.[151] Following this rainfall, she chronicles a period of intense difficulty with her son:

> weeks' worth of wrestling him
> into his stroller, tantrums in shop aisles,
> strained lullabies, night terrors,
> chairs heaped with laundry (33)

She finally manages to find some space and time to rest, recounting, "I at last put him down / for the nap we both need, / my brain a slow smoulder" but is unable to do so, as "Ten minutes later, he shifts / in his sheets, kicking off blankets, rising / while I sink" (33). The opposing directions in which the son and mother are moving—the child up and the mother down—highlights more than just her physical exhaustion, but the extent to which the speaker feels burdened and weighed down by motherhood.

---

[151] While there is no mention of her relationship breakdown directly in this poem, others in the collection address it, such as "Shower," which concludes with the lines: "Only water / will love me when you are gone" (40). "House" also includes the observation of the holidays one year "that Christmas and New Year's, / my son's father with a new woman" and that "the father and mother will only / hold hands through their son" (41).

In "Glass," the mother and child are in the kitchen, a classically domestic space, yet they find themselves on either side of the shattered glass of a broken bottle of maple syrup: "A treacherous brown sea[152] spread out on the floor, / a full litre of syrup studded with splintered glass" (34). The mother and child are physically separated on either side of this perilous divide, the mother even more vulnerable by virtue of being "stranded with bare feet in a corner / like a civilian in a minefield" (34). As she begins to clean up she sees that "My toddler / scurried towards the kitchen, whimpering" and despite her urgent pleas to him to stop—"*Danger! You'll get hurt!... Stay away!*"—he begins to come towards her: "His little craving body wavered… / On the brink, he teetered forward" (34). The mother sacrifices her own safety and injures herself in order to prevent harm from coming to her child: "everything crashed inside me. / I ran through the glass, grabbed him, blasting, / blaming until my shouting went beyond sound" (34). Confronted with his mother's sudden, fear-driven anger, she experiences a newfound identification with her child: "Suddenly my son's face became mine as a child, frozen / before the contortions of my mother's fury" (34). The resonance between her own, present anger and the remembered anger of her mother is brought into abrupt focus: "My own face stiffened into its inheritance, / the familiar mask that was my mother's" (34).

In understanding the interconnected, intergenerational legacy of maternal struggle, the speaker eventually reaches towards forgiveness and understanding. Though her son is frightened and crying, the speaker cradles and comforts him, ignoring for a time her own injuries: "My son clung to me in terror—all those mothers shrieking through my skin. / As he sobbed, I soothed him, carried him / to a chair, glass grinding into every step" (34). Once her son has been calmed and nurtured, the speaker can tend to her own wounds, and arrives at an important though

[152] This description is very similar to the way the ocean is envisioned in "Beach," as a physical correlative to the mother's inner emotional state.

unspoken forgiveness for her own mother: "Later, / washed and bandaged my feet, forgiving / my mother the small crimes I'd tallied against her" (34). She now realizes just how hard mothering can be, and extends compassion towards her mother's failings, extending the symbolism of her own bloodied feet to that of her childhood grievances, leaving "childhood trails of blood wiped clear" (34) at the conclusion of the poem.

"Park" also meditates on the difficulty, monotony and dissolution of the self that mothering sometimes entails. Once again, Lam draws on the effect of a third-person perspective to gain distance and objectivity from the subject she is studying.[153] The park is an idealized childhood setting, and like the beach, it should promise carefree fun and joy, and yet it is characterized for the mother by her own physical exhaustion: "The mother closes her eyes / so her eyelids can fall / even if the rest of her can't" (35). The park is described as "the bounded universe of sand and grass," full of the expected

> children spinning and clambering
> within pockets of glee,
> thuds and skids of balls and boards,
> parental pleas muted by summer air. (35)

The mother takes her son to the sandbox and watches him play:

> Crouched on the sidelines
> under a flicker of shade,
> she pretends to monitor
> the progress of his front-end loader. (35)

[153] This is also reminiscent of Livesay's "The Mother," which I examine in Chapter One and which takes a similar observational tone and standpoint.

This pretense of attention is broken by the child's movement; rather than being confined to the sandbox's borders, "he just wants to run / to the expanse of green, through to / openness" (35). He sees a helicopter in the sky and "reaches up," becoming "a small unity of bone, muscle and breath / aching for flight" (35).[154] Here, the mother too looks to the sky along with her son, the speaker noting that

> She gathers what is left of herself
> to mark movement through the sky,
> her weary loving face
> on the perimeter of joy. (35)

While her face is loving, and she looks alongside her son at the object to which he directs her gaze, she is also "weary" and no longer whole, having only fragments left of her sense of self. Rather than sharing in his excitement, she is left merely on its perimeter, unable to fully partake.

In "Mother," the maternal figure is objectified entirely, experienced in a state of mechanical, automaton emptiness. Stripped of gender and affect, it has lost all human qualities: "Smiling, almost alive, it marches / blank-eyed through the child's day" (48). It is engaged robotically in day-to-day actions and activities,

> buying mangoes, making jam,
> booking play-dates, ensuring
> the child has fresh underwear
> and organic milk with meals. (48)

[154] This upward motion of the child is an echo of the rising in "Ablution" and his seeking the moon in "Naming" (35).

The mother's outward appearance is that of a conventional woman, "Uniformed in flat shoes, / a thick smear of lipstick, an outline of kohl", and yet her tasks and her role are purely utilitarian, as she brings with her "a large sack / packed for every contingency— / heat wave, famine, storm, diarrhea" (48). The child recognizes that there is something amiss with his mother, as he seeks out human connection and an emotional response:

> Sometimes the child isn't fooled.
>
> He gnaws and kicks at it
>
> to bring it back to the life
>
> it barely lived before. (48)

The flat affect of the maternal figure echoes a state of depression, withdrawn and removed from life, while the child needs a responsive and engaged mother: "For he's hungry for something / it cannot offer" (48). However, notwithstanding the child's attempts to connect on a human level, the concluding lines make the mother's dehumanization and objectification complete, as its functions cease entirely once the child is absent:

> When the child's away,
>
> the switch flicks
>
> off. It halts. Folds
>
> itself into something very flat,
>
> unites with the couch, mattress,
>
> floor. (48)

The maternal robot takes up minimal space and slides out of view when not in use, capturing the sense of self-erasure many women experience in motherhood.

In other poems, Lam focuses on the moments of connection and beauty with her son. In "Rainbow," she describes his artwork, observing that

He draws spiky red suns with sunglasses

surrounded by orange stars, clouds

with fat rain tears. Once, a rainbow

above the flight of round green birds. (70)

The child's happy imagination is replicated in the natural world, as in the immediacy of the moment, the mother invites her child outside to see a real rainbow:

Today, I open the back door

and urge him to my side to see

the great curving ribbons suspended above us

before they melt into the sky. (70)

Mother and son stand together, marvelling at the beauty of the colours arcing overheard:

We stand underneath

for a few glowing moments,

knowing colour

from the inside out. (70)

This privileged and unusual knowledge, gained together, is something they both share and delight in.

Lam's collection centres the maternal voice, focusing on the struggles of single-motherhood and the difficulty, exhaustion and self-dissolution involved in caring for small children, alongside moments of interconnection and joy she experiences with her growing son. And while most of Lam's maternally-themed poems gesture towards universal experiences of

motherhood (exhaustion, isolation, self-erasure, love), as a second-generation daughter of East Asian immigrants from Hong Kong, her cultural heritage is also represented in memories of her family's graveside rituals and through her mother's knowledge that she passes on to her son. In this sense, Lam's text also functions as a representation of "Mothers in East Asian communities [who] work to resist and challenge forms of oppression through maintaining ties to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds" (Duncan and Wong 14).

In giving voice to the experience of single-motherhood, beyond the bounded context of conventional, heterosexual marriage, Lam also illuminates a still-marginalized mode of mothering. As she explains in her essay, "Elements," she "felt separate even from the concrete maternal world: confident, cheerful mothers with their swinging pony tails, their clean clothes, their jaunty strides to the park, their chatter and laughter in coffee shops. Mothers with partners, and with able-bodied, able-minded parents to grandparent their children" (86). In order to find time to write while grappling with what it meant to mother alone, Lam explains,

> I coordinated a complex patchwork of childcare with my long-suffering sister, my child's father, babysitters—anyone who could give me three or four hours alone every other day. I'd chastise myself about time lost with my child… But on a few occasions, when my mind cleared, my maternal 'milky eye' became 'crystal': the words would come, as would a portion of radiance, that would give both me and the poem a glimpse of that seal-sleek, bright-eyed perfection that was my child. ("Elements" 85)

Lam's reference to Anne Wilkinson's "Lens" positions her creativity firmly in the tradition of Canadian mother-poets, while also refusing the binary opposition of motherhood and writing—she is able to find radiance in writing poems about her child. In conclusion, Lam asserts the importance of her son to her writing, noting that "He teaches me the beauty and resonance of

each word he learns. Despite the tedium, drudgery, and intense sleep-deprivation, having a child has allowed me to become a witness to the infinite tiny quotidian miracles unfolding all around me" (89). She describes her child as "a crucible, bringing me into and through my deepest passions and fears, past petty ambitions and desires to connect me both to the Earth and to the sublime" (90). Lam's poetry reveals the extent to which motherhood can become the subject of and fuel for artistic creation. To return again to Wilkinson's "milky" eye, rather than signalling an obstruction to creativity, Lam's text reveals the unique and irreplicable vision motherhood can bring.

**Homonormativity, Intensive Mothering, and Ambivalent Articulations of the Lesbian Mother-Artist in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Adult Onset***

If, as Ruth Quiney notes, "the subjective experience and personal politics of mothering have attained significant literary visibility" with the advent of the twenty-first century (19), then it follows that these artistic representations inevitably reflect the shifting and expanding socio-cultural iterations of contemporary motherhood. Ann-Marie MacDonald's third novel, *Adult Onset* (2014), focuses on the minutiae of daily maternal life with razor-sharp precision, featuring as its central protagonist Mary Rose MacKinnon, an author of young adult novels and now stay-at-home mother to two young children she has with her wife, Hilary. The text follows a week in the life of Mary Rose as she stays home alone with her five-year-old son, Matthew, and two-year-old daughter, Maggie, while Hilary is away staging a play in Calgary. Mary Rose suffers from a mounting sense of desperation and fear that she will physically abuse her youngest daughter as she herself was abused as a child. And notwithstanding the fact that Mary Rose has actively and deliberately chosen to set aside her writing career to fully take on a new, primary

maternal role, she expresses a simmering resentment and anger toward Hilary, who is comparatively free and pursing a successful career outside the home. The novel is also noteworthy for the complexity with which it presents the possibilities of the lesbian family and the extent to which MacDonald's fictionalized domesticity reflects what Shelley M. Park describes as "assimilation to normative expectations" of the family (8) and "replications of the domestic spaces and practices of nuclear families" (9). This gives rise to "the nuclear (homonormative) lesbian family" (Park 12) where the same-sex partners "espouse a commitment to monogamy and childrearing within nuclear domestinormative middle-class families" (14). Mary Rose, in fact, embodies a familiar and apparently timeless maternal discontent when she remarks wryly in the early pages of the novel that "She helped change the world to the point where it-got-better enough for her to be here now at her own kitchen table with her own child, legally married to the woman she loves, feeling like a trapped 1950s housewife" (MacDonald *Adult* 10). And while we are not invited to witness Mary Rose actually doing much writing in the week of her life the text follows, her identity as a writer is ever-present, as strangers and acquaintances she encounters frequently ask her when her next book is coming out, and illuminating excerpts from her young adult novels are interspersed throughout the narrative. Ultimately, an active return to writing and her literary career also forms a significant part of the resolution of the novel.

In a 2014 interview while promoting *Adult Onset,* MacDonald reveals that the genesis of the work was her own lived experience as a mother and her own deliberate choice to set her literary career aside temporarily while her children were very small. As she explains to Matt Galloway following her reading at the *Appel Salon*, "I did actually go into what I did refer to quite intentionally as semi-retirement. I wanted to be a homemaker and I did do that"

("Interview"). She reveals that she had decided to end her temporary retirement once her youngest children began school, explaining that "I was in fact enacting an intention, a plan, which was to begin writing fiction when my younger child was five. And I thought that they could then both withstand the temporary psychic abandonment that taking on a marathon which is… a fiction project… because they were both in school all day. So I had that block of time" ("Interview"). Of her chosen subject matter of motherhood for her novel, she reveals that she "wrote it very, very fresh out of the trenches of toddlerhood, of raising children" and that it was due to the immediacy of her lived experience at the time, where "I couldn't take off somewhere, I couldn't do research, I couldn't stay up all night. It was very circumscribed. And I also couldn't wake up from a lovely, repeated REM cycle to my own thoughts, patter over to the desk. No. Lots would happen between [when] my drying, cracked eyeballs popped or creaked open in the morning and I actually arrived at my desk. So I tried to plow all of that into this [the novel]" ("Interview").

Reviews of the text have remarked on the striking and inescapable similarities between MacDonald's life and the characters and setting of *Adult Onset* (Gordon 88), similarities which MacDonald confirms are more than mere coincidence in her interview with Galloway. Neta Gordon likewise describes Macdonald's work as "both highly intertextual and self-referential" and that "The figure of MacDonald herself—military brat, East Coast transplant to Toronto, multiethnic, Catholic, queer artist—is explored via refracted examinations of familiar, national, and sexual histories" (85-86). MacDonald reveals some of her frustration with the limitations motherhood imposed on her creativity, notwithstanding the fact that she purposely chose to put her career aside for a period of time in order to be the primary caregiver: "having set my career aside… having gone into the centre of [motherhood], every now and then I would think, if only I

were kind of a 1950s male writer and there was this adoring woman who ironed my shirts, I had a whole *Mad Men*-author-envy fantasy thing going on" ("Interview"). She also exposes some of the fears she had about taking up motherhood as her subject, worrying that "I'm writing about stuff that a lot of people are not going to care about… it's not big, I'm writing something small" ("Interview"). Ultimately, though, she decides that "this is what you're doing. Stay with it. Believe in it. And do it" ("Interview"). As Quiney observes of the contemporary moment in literature, "Maternal writers… have entered a longstanding debate about the right of female experience to be recognized as politically and culturally important. They are also struggling to delineate an active, expressive maternal subject in the contemporary West" (20). In response to an audience question regarding the representation of maternal ambivalence in *Adult Onset*, MacDonald reveals that she believes her lesbian identity and experience offers her a unique view on motherhood, explaining that

> Being a lesbian I never thought I'd get married, I didn't want to have children or bear children and I have not borne children. I have adopted children [like Mary Rose in the novel]. And that's another way, another portal, another way of viewing family. I was writing about parenting from a number of different perspectives and feeling like I'm coming at this, in a way, as an outsider, coming closer and closer and closer to the centre of life as we all know it. ("Interview")

She goes on to reveal that while she used to view herself "as somebody who was never going to get up in anything really too womany" instead "I went right into the centre of it. And… it was the scariest thing I ever did. 'Cause I could have not. But I would have missed so much" ("Interview").

Gordon argues that both the critical reception and commercial promotion of *Adult Onset* elided, and all but erased, the lesbian aspects of the text, noting that "the novel was marketed and received not as a queer story but as a domestic drama primarily about parenthood and the lasting trauma of child abuse" (81). Gordon asserts, instead, that "*Adult Onset* is largely a complex story of coming out" (81), and my analysis takes this one step further and asserts that the novel is also more than "a queer story" (81) about a woman's difficult history of coming-out to her parents, but is more principally about what it means to mother as a lesbian and as a writer. Notwithstanding the enormous political and social gains of the LGBTQ+ movement in Canada, "Motherhood and lesbian sexuality are [still] antithetical to each other within Western culture" and "lesbian mothers are constantly denied any fixity of identity" (Gabb "Imag(in)ing" 9). Jacqui Gabb suggests that "this fluidity" is precisely what allows "queer mothering" to "challeng[e] prevailing notions of 'the family'" and unleash the "transgressive potentialities of… lesbian maternal selves" (9). She goes on to suggest that "the lesbian family" is at "the cutting edge of queer politics, radically challenging traditional categories of gender and destabilising the hetero-normative within society" (22). However, Amy Hequembourg also notes that "the vibrancy of lesbian parenting and the diversity of experiences among mothers are diminished by the larger cultural emphasis on their similarities to… heterosexual mothers" (1-2). She describes this emphasis on similarity as an "assimilationism" that "refers to a constellation of discursive practices aimed at emphasizing similarity as a strategy to attain equality" (4) and that these "Hegemonic discourses on lesbian motherhood come from academic, legal and popular spheres" (2).

Indeed, MacDonald's novel does, in many ways, participate in this assimilationist representation of lesbian motherhood, the first example being in the title of the text's very first

chapter, "Monday: Dreams of an Everyday Housewife" (MacDonald *Adult* 1). This "Everyday Housewife" "is at her cheerful kitchen table checking e-mail" while "Her two-year-old is busy driving a doll stroller into the baseboard" (1). She "skims her five-year-old's school newsletter online and signs up to accompany his class to the reptile museum," (1) after which she "gets up and slides a tray of vine-ripened tomatoes into the oven to slow-roast" and then "returns to the table, its bright non-toxic vinyl IKEA cloth obscured by bills and reminders for service calls she needs to book for the various internal organs of her house" (3). These ordinary, quotidian details of a mother volunteering for her child's field-trip, cooking fresh food surrounded by non-toxic textiles with her youngest child playing with a stroller nearby presents the most idealized image of middle-class maternal domesticity. As Hequembourg notes, "discourses about lesbian motherhood emphasize the similarities between the parenting practices of lesbian women and other mothers" and that "Lesbian mothers implicate themselves in these discourses as they constitute their subjectivities in ways that complement normalizing discourses about their parenting abilities" (10). Julie M. Thompson similarly observes that while "Lesbian mothers may sometimes be interpreted as revolutionizing the territories of lesbianism and motherhood… they are also often criticized for mimicking, copying, or selling out to straight culture" (10).

Mary Rose's experiences of motherhood have fundamentally changed how she interacts with and interprets the world around her. This transformation seems most surprising to Mary Rose herself, who admits that "She never dreamt she would be married. She never expected to become a mother. She never imagined she would be a 'morning person' or drive a station wagon or be capable of following printed instructions for an array of domestic contraptions that come with some-assembly-required" (11)[155]. This is, in part, because before marriage and children, she

[155] Later, the narrator reiterates this unexpected turn Mary Rose's life has taken into motherhood: "She never wanted to be a biological mother. Not only had she zero desire to experience the miracle of childbirth, she figured she'd

saw herself primarily as one thing: a writer. She reflects that "until now, the only thing she had ever been able to assemble was a story" (11). In fact, "Mary Rose led a whole other life before getting married and having children; a bohemian trajectory that spanned careers as actor, TV writer and, ultimately, author" (10). Her literary career is undeniably successful, having written two young adult novels, the first of which "was a surprise crossover bestseller, a hit with young and 'old' adults alike" and "The momentum carried through to the second" novel, of which we learn there is to be a third forthcoming, designed as they are as a "Trilogy—although she has yet to write the third" (10). This interrupted literary trajectory is the background from which we encounter Mary Rose, who is now suddenly immersed in the minutiae of motherhood, despite the fact that "a mere three years before Matthew was born, she was living in boozy boho twilight with erratic Renée, three to five cats and the occasional panic attack" (11). And "Then, in a few blinks of an eye, she was married to blue-eyed striding Hil, living in a bright semi-detached corner house, other-mother to two wonderful children. It was as though she had waved a wand and presto, she had a life" (11-12). Mary Rose reveals the perniciousness of the mythology of marriage and motherhood, that notwithstanding the radical potentialities of her lesbian identity and despite her obviously successful literary career, she nonetheless equates marriage and motherhood to having "a life" (12). It is her marriage, her home-ownership and her children—rather than her successful literary career—that afford her a feeling of legitimacy.

As it turns out, it is a legitimacy that she is not sure she deserves or is particularly suited for. She struggles with adjusting to her new, domesticated life and maternal identity. She explains that "it was… as though she were a factory, tooled for a wartime economy. Apparently it was peacetime now, but she could not seem to find the switch to kill the machines" (12). When

---

have a better chance of not screwing up her children if her id couldn't claim them as flesh and blood" (MacDonald *Adult* 35).

her partner Hilary senses her discontentedness and asks her if she wouldn't like "to start working again, to come out of her self-appointed retirement" Mary Rose reacts with indignation and replies, "I can't believe you're saying this, Hil… I need to find out who I am without *work*. I'm tired of being a demon elf, spinning cotton into gold" (12).[156] Likening her creative expression and identity as a writer to "being a demon elf" suggests there is a necessary distance that must be maintained between artistic creation and the real, material world, and that being a writer requires a descent into darkness and otherness that inherently sets one apart from ordinary life. As Mary Rose continues telling Hilary, "I am a human being, I want a human life, I want a garden, I want peace" (12), as if being human, having a life, cultivating a garden and enjoying a peaceful existence are all incompatible with writing. Hilary can see through to the deeper currents of dissatisfaction and distress in Mary Rose, as the narrator informs us that "She asked if Mary Rose would consider 'seeing someone.'" (12). Mary Rose is resistant to the idea of needing therapy, fearing that it will somehow impact her writing: "Mary Rose is not about to risk having her creativity dismantled by a well-meaning therapist who might mistake the riches of her unconscious for hazardous waste. Even if her creativity is on hold at the moment" (13). This state of suspended artistic animation is captured in "The cursor blink[ing]" (13) expectantly on her computer even as Mary Rose acknowledges that her "creativity… has served her so well she has been able to enter semi-retirement in her forties and arrive, against all odds, at this kitchen table with her child" (14).

---

[156] Hilary and Mary Rose have another similar conversation later in the novel, when they are both awake in the middle of the night in the kitchen:

> "Do you want to go back to work?" asked Hil.
> "Why? Am I doing such a lousy job here?" She tried to make it sound like a joke.
> "What are you doing?"
> "I'm cleaning the vinyl stripping on the freezer drawer," said Mary Rose. (130)

Notwithstanding Mary Rose's conscious choice to pause her literary career in order to become a stay-at-home mother, it is clear that she harbours a significant degree of resentment toward Hilary for her continued life outside their home. When she is suddenly unable to find the scissors in the knife-block, she reveals an unarticulated anxiety that—despite the narrator's wry, humorous undertones—her domestic concerns are trivial or small, while inwardly lashing out at Hilary for not having to concern herself about such matters: "Did Hilary put them in the utility drawer? Mary Rose has, on more than one occasion… implored Hilary to place the scissors in the special niche in the knife block—she is aware that this might not seem like a priority to someone who goes to a rehearsal room every day in fresh clothes, often in a different city, and has yet to be home for a bout of preschool head lice, but it matters to Mary Rose" (30). After all, "She is the one who cooks and shops and takes seriously the steep domestic learning curve that is homemaking. Indeed, in military parlance, Mary Rose is at the domestic sharp end. How can Hilary call herself a feminist, much less a lesbian, if she can't even respect Mary Rose enough to put the scissors back in the right spot?" (30).[157] The imagined and illusory disrespect Mary Rose conjures sets her spinning into a helpless anger:

> The rage zooms up from Mary Rose's gut and she's off. She grabs the phone from its base—impossible to 'tear' a phone from its receiver anymore, where is a mad housewife to turn for an inanimate answer to her rage?—and is scrolling down the list of calls, on the point of speed-dialing Hilary's BlackBerry—she'll be in a meeting, but why should

[157] In *Lesbian Motherhood: Gender, Families and Sexual Citizenship* (2009), Roisin Ryan-Flood cites a recent research study by Jacqui Gabb which found that the supposed egalitarian ideal of the lesbian family is not nearly as uniform as had been previously posited, finding that "childcare and housework were not shared equally among the lesbian couples in her study" (158).

> that take priority over Mary Rose's ability to cut up a chicken for the freezer against her homecoming next week?—when it rings in her hand. (30)[158]

Ironically, she quickly discovers that it is not Hilary who has misplaced the scissors but Mary Rose herself, who used them to open a delivery box and then distractedly left them on the floor, where Maggie then found them and began playing with them. Once she carefully extracts the scissors from her daughter's hands, she is awash in fear: "Mary Rose is shaking. What fresh hell was set to open, and how had she stumbled to its lip?" (31).

This openly acknowledged "having of everything" leads Mary Rose to a private struggle to understand the reasons for her apparently inexplicable rage. As she notes confusedly, "There is nothing wrong with her life. She has a loving partner and two healthy, beautiful children. She has put money into education funds, she has put photos into albums. She can make pancakes without a recipe, she knows where the IKEA Allen key is, and has memorized the international laundry symbols" (167). Nonetheless, Mary Rose exposes and expresses a deep-seated maternal ambivalence, as she grapples with the reasons for her inner turmoil and explosions of anger. She has much to be grateful for and she knows she should savour it, and yet she is beset by anger and a concurrent fear of that anger. As the narrator ponders: "Why can't Mary Rose enjoy the moment? This is the sweet time. She knows it. Can see it from the outside. Mother and child on the steps. *Look, Mumma, I did it, Me-self*. The mother is healthy, youthful. It is a nice house. It is a nice day. A nice dog. Just add feelings" (142). Rather than the expected feelings of pleasure,

---

[158] Mary Rose also expresses her anger directly at Hilary on two occasions later in the novel. Once, when they are having a discussion about why Mary Rose is buying extra Q-tips that she uses specifically for cleaning the kitchen, Mary Rose exclaims, outraged, "Why, in my own house, can I not have a box of kitchen-specific Q-tips? You never have to see them, you never have to use them—why *would* you, since I'm the one who does the shopping and the deep cleaning anyway" (130). The second time, Hilary is away and they have an argument over the phone about a set of nesting pots Mary Rose wants to buy, when she shouts at Hilary: "I know it's not a huge priority for you that we have a full set of nesting pots, but when you reach for one, it's there. *You* don't *have* to care because *I do* and now you're saying that my concerns are *trivial*" (300).

contentment and joy, Mary Rose instead feels "Dead. Flat and grey, like sheet metal pressing against her chest where spongy feelings ought to be. Are other people just pretending to have feelings, she wonders? Or do they really feel them? Everything is fine—shiny ladybug, silky head, mother on the steps. But the mother has a blank look on her face" (142). Mary Rose is self-aware enough to know that this maternal ambivalence has a particular poignancy as it relates to her daughter, rather than her son. She wonders at the distance between them one night as she approaches Maggie sleeping in her room and "reaches down to stroke her back, but the child pulls away", asking herself, "Is it that Maggie is a girl? That isn't supposed to be a problem for card-carrying feminists" (158).

Beyond the realm of the strictly maternal and with respect to Mary Rose's literary career, the narrative is repeatedly punctuated by strangers, neighbours and acquaintances stopping her on the street or in coffee shops to ask her when the third book in her trilogy is coming out. Riding her bike past her local grocery store, "She sees one of the dads from Matthew's school… He is a political cartoonist—or is he the physicist? She slows… 'When's the book coming out?'" (134) he asks. The narrator notes that "It's a funny turn of phrase, as though the book were cowering in the closet. 'When Maggie's in university!' she replies" (134). The implication in her humorous reply is that it is Maggie that is preventing her from writing, positioning her daughter specifically in opposition to her writing, rather than her son Matthew (though this may be due, in part, to the fact that Maggie is the youngest, and will therefore be the last to grow up). Later in the novel, as she is awake at night and cleaning the kitchen, she is more explicit in her feelings that marriage and motherhood have impeded her literary career. Unable to reach Hilary on her cell phone, Mary Rose reasons that "Hil is probably out for drinks with the cast and can't hear her phone in the noisy bar" (294). Despite this brief attempt at rationalization, her next thoughts

begin to imagine the freedom and creativity she would be experiencing were she not so encumbered: "If Mary Rose weren't married to Hil she would probably be living alone. She wouldn't be a mother. She would likely have finished the trilogy by now and have started a new series" (294). Then she concedes that "Maybe she'd be a single mother with a full-time nanny. And a hot girlfriend" (294). The "full-time nanny" in this scenario would replace her current role as a stay-at-home mother, leaving her free to have "a hot girlfriend," just like the male authors MacDonald jokingly idealized in her interview with Matt Galloway.

Indeed, despite her supposed "retirement" from literature, Mary Rose often finds herself thinking about her as-yet-unwritten third novel. Pulling into her driveway with Maggie in the backseat, Mary Rose contemplates her garden and realizes "that something is cooking in the back of her mind. The third in the trilogy, gestating… shifting through Time… She has the sudden conviction that it will have something to do with time travel" (182). A few days later, in a coffee shop with Maggie, a stranger approaches her to ask if she's "MR MacKinnon" and then gushes, "Oh my God, I *love* your books, they saved me, wow I can't believe I'm meeting you" (229). After he takes a selfie with her, he asks, "When's the next one coming out?" and she replies, "I'm not sure… I'm hoping I'm writing it right now in a parallel universe" (229).[159] The stranger continues to gush over her, discussing detailed plot-points and concluding with, "I love you. I can't believe I just said that" (230). Mary Rose thanks him, but then "She flees, an imposter in her own life; husk of whoever it was that, once upon a time, created a world that others could claim, a world in which readers could immerse themselves… and feel they belonged. It is a world from which she blithely exiled herself, confident she could return any time" (230). She wonders if "Perhaps Hilary is right, she needs to start working again," only to

[159] When her father makes a similar inquiry, asking "How's the book coming?" she replies more simply and less glibly that "It's on hold" (240).

be beset by more anxiety: "But what if she attempts a return only to find the portal barred? Like Narnia" (230). She increasingly begins to acknowledge the importance her writing holds for her. Unable to sleep one night while Hilary is still away, Mary Rose gets up and goes downstairs to the kitchen: "She should start working—Alice Munro did some of her best work while her kids were sleeping. She sets her laptop on the kitchen table, creates a new document and, after some considerable thought, entitles it 'Book.' The cursor blinks" (293). The vague yet open-ended title of "Book" is suggestive of possibility, and the blinking cursor awaits expectantly for her to begin.

At the end of the novel, as Mary Rose begins to unravel memories of her own childhood abuse and come to terms with the legacy of her own mother's postpartum depression, she confesses to Hilary, who is still working in Calgary, that she came close to harming Maggie in a fit of rage, admitting, "I almost hurt her" (329). Hilary expresses her belief that "I… think you need help" and when Mary Rose bristles and angrily insists, "Please don't pathologize me!", Hilary clarifies her suggestion, which is for more childcare: "I mean help with the kids… I think we should schedule Candace to come full-time for a while" (329). Wary at the prospect of surrendering her role as stay-at-home mother, Mary Rose asks, "And what am I supposed to do while she does my job?" What Hilary suggests is that Mary Rose devote herself to her writing again, telling her, "Finish the trilogy" (329).

Towards the end of the novel, Mary Rose remarks to one of her best friends, Gigi, that "Hil is sick of me… I used to be the successful older man, now I'm a frustrated housewife" (354). She laments the change in gender roles, despite the fact that she chose to become the primary caretaker of their children and temporarily sideline her career. She was more comfortable in the role of "successful older man" and feels dissatisfied with being the "frustrated

housewife." Gigi reminds her, "You're a woman… Face it" (354). Regardless of the progressiveness of their lesbian family and the opportunities it presents for a radical reimagining of the family, Mary Rose comes to acknowledge the extent to which she has unwittingly reinscribed traditional notions of womanhood and motherhood. Gigi counsels Mary Rose not to blame herself for the situation in which she finds herself, explaining, "We never thought we'd be able to get married. We thought we were out in the cold, so we made the cold into a party, but cold is cold and family is family and you guys are mine. I'm not a writer, I can't say it pretty" (354).[160] Choosing to step into the role of "mother" and "wife," laden with their unique and intertwined sociohistorical and personal baggage, can be a minefield of social and emotional traps, even if one intends to subvert their traditional scripts and expectations. Mary Rose finds herself ensnared in a number of ways, from the very personal repetition of abusive tendencies she experienced as a child, to suddenly feeling powerless and uninteresting as a mother whose concerns are principally confined to the domestic sphere of the home. She struggles with a loss of identity as a writer, notwithstanding the fact that she chose to go on a literary hiatus while her children were small. What Mary Rose is seeking throughout the novel is a connection with her authentic self, a way to mother and write and exist in a way that refuses damaging maternal scripts she learned from her own mother and cultivates a new, radical maternal subjectivity that encompasses her lesbian identity and her literary career.

The novel's conclusion has Mary Rose reckoning with her creativity and her literary career. While Mary Rose appears to have decided against finishing the trilogy at this point, she *is* returning to writing, with a novel that changes directions creatively, and will be based on her

[160] The sentiments Gigi expresses are aligned with "The theoretical literature of lesbian parenting" which "has also examined the possibilities for new formulations of kinship" where "the importance of biology to kinship is displaced among lesbian and gay communities, where rejection from families of origin often leads to the formation of new 'families we choose', based on friendship, love and choice" (Ryan-Flood 11).

mother's experiences of motherhood and child loss. The narrator explains, "It is time to make a fresh incision through the scars; allow sections of Time to bleed afresh, then re-graft them. *After* seeks *Before*" (376). We return not only to her mother's stories, whose narrative consciousness MacDonald has interspersed throughout the novel, but to the Word document Mary Rose created earlier in the text (293). As MacDonald explains, Mary Rose now sits down and "clicks on the blank document called 'Book' and types… *December in Winnipeg, 1956. The sky was huge and grey. The regional bus groaned, its exhaust thick with carbon…*" (376). As she begins this process of writing a new novel, with a new maternal subjectivity, she wonders, "When Odysseus finally makes it home, he is much changed, but his loved ones know him… Will she make it home? Will she recognize herself?" (381). She positions herself within a long trajectory of time and history, noting that "It will all go back to carbon one day, back to gemstones and crystals and star stuff. She has a vantage point for the moment. An 'I.' Pinhole aperture, like an old-fashioned camera. All she can do is try to bear witness. Writer, write thyself…" (382). MacDonald thus creates a mise en abyme at the conclusion of the text, where we discover that Mary Rose is in the process of writing at least some parts of the novel that we have been reading.

MacDonald's *Adult Onset* explores the figure of the mother-artist as refracted through contemporary lesbian motherhood and the intergenerational legacy of abuse. Mary Rose also exemplifies and expresses many of the pressures of contemporary motherhood, influenced by the ideology of "intensive motherhood" as described by O'Reilly, with its demands for perfectly calibrated, twenty-four-hour, hyper-vigilant maternal care. As Susan Driver observes, "Against formidable pressures to conform, mothers live and speak as defiantly desiring subjects, exceeding and queering the very terms of heteronormativity they are compelled to negotiate day by day. Diffuse and prolific languages of maternal desire criss-cross corporeal and symbolic

boundaries, destabilizing closed systems of representation while sustaining and rebuilding social practices and meanings." (7). And "lesbian mothers" in particular "are questioning and surviving multiple oppressions as they forge creative families while struggling to live and write through transgressive desires" (Driver 24). Hequembourg argues likewise that, "lesbian motherhood poses promising terrain for understanding lingering ideologies about motherhood and the consequences of those ideologies for all women" (68).

Mary Rose reacts to her internalized expectations and pressures to live up to the potent image of the idealized mother she has assimilated from her cultural milieu with an intense and still-taboo maternal ambivalence and anger, even as (and perhaps because) she actively chooses to take on the lion's share of domestic and childcare work in her marriage. As Mary Rose discovers and research into lesbian motherhood has demonstrated, "a lesbian identity does not necessarily guarantee equality in a relationship," an assumption and expectation that is borne of "essentialist accounts of lesbian experience" (Ryan-Flood 159). Furthermore, the pervasive power of the institution of motherhood manages to coopt even the most ardent of feminist intentions. As Bonnie Mann explains, "Lesbian mothers who did not have… children in the context of previous heterosexual relationships imagine ourselves to have chosen mothering with an explicitness and determination that is a stronger act of choosing than most heterosexual mothers" and yet, "we were welcomed into something already established long before our arrival, the terms already set" (151). In this way, "the figure of the lesbian mother in a context in which the myth of motherhood still functions as a lynch-pin of dominant heterosexist discourse and dominant modes of heterosexual life" is coopted into "heteronormativity," which "manages to occupy and redeploy itself through this figure" (Mann 154).

At the outset, Mary Rose's ardent commitment to her role as mother appears, at first, to be in direct opposition to her professional, literary career. Her partner, Hilary, frequently encourages Mary Rose to return to her writing as a balm for her ambivalence and distress, sensing the extent to which she is struggling under her self-imposed expectations for her own mothering and recognizing that Mary Rose needs to recapture something of her individuality and independent sense of self in order to be a better mother to their children. Furthermore, Mary Rose's choice of subject for her next book, beginning with telling her own mother's story of infant loss and motherhood, rather than completing the trilogy of young adult novels, indicates that her literary creativity will also become an avenue for reckoning with and honouring her own matrilineage. The mother-artist MacDonald creates in Mary Rose is of a writer who rediscovers her literary voice and creativity in the wake of and largely because of the reckoning into which her relationship with her daughter pushes her. It is through her conflicted feelings and rage towards Maggie that Mary Rose finally turns to face the repercussions of her own childhood and her relationship with *her* mother, which then in turn inspires the novel she begins to write at the end of *Adult Onset.* Her motherhood and her creativity are thus intertwined through the intermediary provocation of her own daughter.[161] Mary Rose functions as an example of maternal subjectivity and maternal artistry that is by turns complex, angry, ambivalent and

---

[161] The final scene of the novel also reveals that Mary Rose finally experiences the happiness and warm connection to Maggie that she has longed to feel throughout the novel:

> Maggie is drawing hieroglyphs in Mary Rose's datebook, which she has looted from her bag. Mary Rose tips the contents onto the kitchen floor and sits cross-legged next to the child.
>
> 'Purse,' says Maggie.
> 'Bag,' says Mary Rose. 'That is a lesbian word for 'purse.''
> Hil says, 'I'm a lesbian and I have a purse.'
> Mary Rose looks up. 'Did you feel that just now?'
> 'What?'
> 'Happy.' (383)

conflicted. She is also a mother-protagonist who grows into her own strength and empowerment and, in the process, rediscovers her creative voice.

**The Primacy of Maternal Consciousness and Subjectivity**

The exploration and expression of maternal subjectivity in Canadian literature over the past half-century has functioned to dismantle essentialist ideologies of motherhood and revealed the complexity, diversity and multiplicity of maternal experience. The five authors of the exemplary texts I analyze in this chapter all refuse the traditional silencing of the maternal and assert the primacy and centrality of their maternal consciousness to their literary creativity. As Ryan-Flood observes of recent literary trends, "feminist writers have begun to acknowledge and explore the complexity of women's experiences of motherhood, in both its positive and negative aspects" (152).

Contemporary expressions of maternal consciousness and subjectivity must be understood in the broader context of feminist discourse. While dominant feminisms of the 1970s were critical and wary of motherhood and the biological, social and economic limitations it placed on women's lives, maternally-focussed theorists such as Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow began to grapple with feminist implications and applications in the realm of motherhood. Through the 1990s and into the early 2000s, key thinkers including Sara Ruddick, Sharon Hays, Susan Maushart and Daphne de Marneffe marked a growing trend towards the inclusion of maternal subjectivity and experience in feminist theorizations of the third-wave. And in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Andrea O'Reilly has been responsible for generating and curating a vast body of maternal scholarship exploring the wide array of

social, cultural, political, racial, sexual and historical forces which shape women's understandings and experiences of contemporary motherhood.

It is against this evolving theoretical backdrop that growing numbers of Canadian women writers have also taken up motherhood as the subject and central focus of their work. The matrifocal texts they produce categorically reject biological essentialist notions of motherhood, pushing aside idealized notions of mothers as endlessly giving, self-sacrificing and contented. Most importantly, they rescue maternal subjectivity from its long history of silent self-effacement, asserting instead a vociferous, self-assured and expressive maternal consciousness. As O'Reilly argues, "Much of current feminist writing and activism is concerned with the recovery of the maternal voice. While recognizing how difficult it is to speak that which has been silenced, disguised, and marginalized, writers today seek to make the maternal story narratable" (*Mother* 257). Elsewhere, O'Reilly writes, "Matrifocal narratives, written as they are in the voice of the mother and from her perspective, serve to map the lived and real contours and configurations of maternal experience, those masked and distorted by patriarchal cartographies of motherhood" ("Coda" 371-372). These matrifocal texts are the focus of this chapter, beginning with Atwood's exploration of the fears and ambivalence of motherhood through the use of fragmentation, projection, doubling and *mise en abyme*, while simultaneously acknowledging the limits of representation in language. Contemporaneously, Nicole Brossard writes out of a uniquely Quebecoise context, and asserts the subversive potentiality of lesbian maternal consciousness, refusing the bondage of patriarchy and heternormativity through her revolutionary use of *écriture au feminin.* Into the 1990s, Clare Harris represents Black maternal subjectivity as polyvocal and heterogeneous, and as an important source of empowerment. For Harris, motherhood and creativity are mutually generative, co-existent and dynamic. Fiona

Tinwei Lam confronts the difficulties and isolation of single-motherhood while also honouring her East Asian heritage, and finding access to a heightened sense of vitality and creativity through her experiences of motherhood. And finally, Ann-Marie MacDonald explores the figure of the mother-artist as refracted through lesbian motherhood, exemplifying and expressing the pressures of contemporary motherhood and the ideology of heteronormative motherhood. MacDonald's maternal subjectivity is complex, angry and ambivalent, but also evolving and in flux, reaching towards authenticity and self-understanding.

The matrifocal texts I explore in this chapter represent a diversity of maternal subjectivities encompassing experiences of biological, adoptive, single, lesbian and Black motherhoods. Maternal consciousness is refracted through fragmented and multiple subjectivities, the paradoxical gratitude and ennui of new motherhood, and personal legacies of racism and homophobia, and the revolutionary potentialities of feminist discourse. The literary works of Atwood, Brossard, Harris, Lam and MacDonald represent the growing vociferousness, multiplicity, and polyvocality of maternal consciousness in Canada over the past half-century. Interpreted through the lens of feminist and maternal theory, their texts successfully and fruitfully merge the maternal and the creative. Rather than functioning as an impediment or hindrance to their creativity, these writers find inspiration, motivation and artistic vision in their experiences of motherhood. Motherhood is transformed from a site of silence and repression to one of honesty and generative creativity. The mother-artist is no longer an impossibility, merely afforded space or rendered corporeally; she is the central protagonist whose maternal consciousness and experiences function as an integral part of her artistic practice and expression. In the texts of these five acclaimed authors, the mother-artist takes her rightful place at centre stage.

# Conclusion

## "*Mama*. That's me": A Brief Autotheoretical Turn, and the Personal Politics of the Mother-Writer

Erin Wunker's 2016 *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy: Essays on Everyday Life* is comprised of a series of brief, meandering reflections on rape culture, friendship, and motherhood, bound together by Wunker's desire to think through the implications of feminist theory and praxis on women's everyday lives. It is eminently readable, straddling as it does academic discourse and the more popular genre of the personal essay, and Wunker largely succeeds in translating opaque, theoretical concepts into accessible, deeply personal reflections on her own life as a feminist, an academic and a mother. In my view, her most noteworthy rhetorical choice—and which is not reflected anywhere in the title or subtitle—is her decision to introduce her identity as a mother in the very opening pages of the text, with her "Preface: Letter to my Daughter" (Wunker 7). She reveals her vulnerability and her sense of uncertainty, confessing, "I don't know how to do this, wee one. Let's start there. Let's start with a blank page because despite the tiredness of the metaphor there is something beautiful and expansive and awe-inspiring about a blank page" (7). In addressing her daughter directly, she positions herself as a mother, and in drawing attention to the "blank page," she further identifies herself as a mother in the act of writing. She notes the bodily interrelation she feels with her still-infant daughter, observing that while "I didn't want to write my story as though it was yours," the reality remains that "my story is your story. My body made your body, as bizarre and banal as that feels to write. We are each other's indexes at a cellular level" (8). She dedicates the collection of essays to her daughter because of their deep interrelationality: "And so, my girl, these essays are first and foremost for you. Their partialities, their tenacious vulnerabilities, their

fallibilities, and their insistent graspings at joy are my small attempts to show you that it's okay to try" (8). Furthermore, her feminism is now irrevocably refracted through her daughter's existence: "When I write about having a gendered body in the world, I think, now, about your tiny infant body" (8). In the penultimate essay on feminist mothering, Wunker concludes with her daughter taking her first steps towards her across their kitchen floor, "I look her way. And there she is, standing on her own two, chubby feet. She takes one step towards me, then two-three-four" (185). Wunker responds with exuberance and joy, "*Wow wow wow!* I clap! *Look at you, little goose!* Then she's up on her tiptoes laughing and clapping at her own feat. *Mama! Mama!*" Wunker picks up her toddler and hugs her, affirming her motherhood, embracing her integral identity: "*Mama.* That's me… Yes, that's me" (185-186).

Wunker's positioning of her motherhood in places of primacy within her theoretical text and her focus on the ways in which her mothering is a prism through which she refracts her understanding, alongside her bodily interconnection with her daughter, resonates deeply with my own intentions for this concluding chapter. After all, buried within the grammar and syntax and themes and argumentation and quotations and theory and textual citations that make up this dissertation is another "Mama," a "me" that is a mother and, also, a mother writing. Beneath and contained within this muted subjectivity, this disembodied, critical, impersonal, academic, scholarly "I," is a mother to a daughter who has—over the course of my PhD—transformed from a hilarious two-year-old in diapers to an impossibly wonderful ten-year-old girl. My motherhood—however much I tried to compartmentalize it, negotiate with it, work around and in spite of it—has infused my entire experience of graduate school. And as I have read and thought about and written about all the mothers writing about mothers writing (and painting, in the case of *Cat's Eye* and *Whispering in Shadows*), I have found myself caught in the same meta-textual

funhouse-mirror as a mother writing too. I saw myself reflected, refracted, disassembled and reassembled. I sometimes wept with the self-recognition of it, grateful and vindicated to find something I had felt, experienced, said, done, not-done, as a mother, presented to me in prose or poetry that was stunning in its clarity and beauty or incisive in its unflinching accuracy. Like those imagined, literary mothers, I rigorously compartmentalized my time, I lost sleep, I worried, I felt guilty and torn into pieces. I loved my daughter with a ferocious, primal intensity that exceeded all rationality, I marvelled at her beauty, her existence, her growing-up. I bathed her and nourished her and read stories to her and laughed with her and took her to museums on rainy days and played with her in the park on beautiful afternoons. I also lost my patience and yelled in frustration when I was stressed out, when I was constantly, *constantly,* interrupted while I tried to work, when deadlines pressed in on me and I fell behind, and then swirled a uniquely maternal guilt-drain when I failed to meet my own expectations for myself as a scholar and as a mother. I saw myself in all of those mother-writers, in myriad ways, both flattering and not-so-much. In fact, my choice of subject for this project, the artist-mother in Canada, was borne of one of these very moments of sudden self-recognition, when I read Dorothy Livesay's "The Mother" for the first time. Her observations of the mother-figure, that "She cannot walk alone" and "She cannot think alone," (*CP* 161) articulated for the first time the ways in which I had felt—but never said aloud—that my own autonomy and individuation had been swept aside by the exigencies of my daughter's needs. And yet, Livesay also captured the beauty that was intrinsic to this surrendering to the life of another, particularly the extent to which it is a role and relationality that is actively chosen, as the mother "must / Have chosen here to stay" (161) and the privilege this provides of being able to discover the world anew through the eyes of a child. Finding myself and my experiences reflected in a poem was enormously validating, and also opened up

possibilities for future intellectual inquiry. When I returned to the poem while preparing for my first comprehensive exams, I had a flash of insight and curiosity: what about the mother immortalized in poetic form, and the mother-artist she represents? I had come into the PhD program interested in the Canadian artist-novel and had been trying (and failing) to formulate a project that captured Leonard Cohen's *The Favourite Game*, Laurence's *The Diviners* and Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, but casting Cohen aside (however much it pained me) and using a maternal frame instead had never occurred to me until I re-encountered Livesay's poem.

The irony in this journey, and one that was often viscerally painful, was that as I was reading and researching and thinking and writing about motherhood and literature and the divergence/merging of these two topics, I was missing time with my own daughter. And the person who most stepped into the breach to help with childcare was my own mother. This assuaged my guilt somewhat, as my daughter and my mother have a close, beautiful, loving relationship, and I know my daughter is deeply content when she's with her grandmother. My mother plays elaborate (and messy) games with her, pulling toys out of bins and boxes, painting and drawing, setting up toy-towns and stores and school-rooms and veterinary clinics for all the stuffed animals. She has a capacity for patience and play that I struggled to achieve in the midst of what often felt like frantic juggling of my academic work, maternal care, and household tasks. In another twist of painful and rage-inducing irony, this division of labour in the home, which seemed to replicate and reinforce every patriarchal paradigm whose refusal I was writing about, was borne of the very materiality of my academic career, which meant that, unlike my husband who works in a full-time job with often long hours, I was *physically home* most of the time. Beyond the first year of my PhD with my coursework necessitating being on campus almost every day of the week, as I moved into comps prep and dissertation writing, the majority of the

time I found myself working at my too-small desk surrounded by piles of books, crammed into a corner of our bedroom, and so a great deal of the daily burden of parenting and the home seemed to fall—often infuriatingly—to me. This rootedness in the home meant that—regardless of whatever stage I may be at in my research or writing—it only made logical sense that I be the one to pick up our daughter from school, take her to swimming lessons, clean the kitchen while she watched cartoons, throw in a load of laundry and prepare dinner. Maybe this lived reality was part of why I found the second-wave feminism I read so deeply resonant. Despite my academic ambitions and my feminist ethos—I kept my last name when my husband and I got married, we have always treated each other as absolute equals, I always had a full-time job before I returned to grad school, etc.—here I was financially dependent, doing laundry, cooking meals, driving my daughter to swimming lessons and otherwise functioning as a stereotypical housewife that I had no intention of being, paradoxically facilitated by the material conditions of being in graduate school, where I was writing my dissertation on Canadian women's literature, motherhood and—of all things—feminism. Often as I wrote about these women who were refusing patriarchal scripts and raging against their own confinement, I felt inextricably and anachronistically trapped by the very same, age-old paradigms, and overcome by the simmering, sublimated resentment this induced. As Heather Wyatt-Nichol, Margarita M. Cardona and Karen Skivers Drake note, "the advantages of autonomy and flexibility that appear inherent in [academia] have the potential to turn into disadvantages as the boundaries between work and home blur, increasing the likelihood of work-family conflict" (108). Particularly "women with young children are more likely to experience obstacles to maintaining productive time for research and publication" (108). The increasingly porous boundaries between my home and academic lives meant I often found myself spending *extra* time parenting and undertaking

domestic tasks and frustratingly *less* time than I wanted on my dissertation, which consequently began to sprawl amorphously over months and years. This was exacerbated exponentially with the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, when schools were closed indefinitely and my daughter was stuck at home with me, suddenly left without her friends and struggling with ineffectual online learning (a struggle which then extended to me, in trying to keep her motivated, focused and on task). Those precious weekday school hours between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., which I had previously tried to guard so religiously as my uninterrupted time for researching and writing, simply evaporated. I often felt crushed and completely defeated under the pressures of parenting 24/7 and the impossibility of maintaining any semblance of academic productivity.

**Autotheory, Motherhood and Me**

Lauren Fournier locates the origins of autotheory in "feminist art, literature, criticism, and activism as it developed through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (34). She defines autotheory as "the integration of the *auto* or 'self' with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware" (12). As an artistic or literary practice, it "reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation" (10). She further describes autotheory "as a provocation" (12) and one that "points to modes of working that integrate the personal and the conceptual, the theoretical and the autobiographical, the creative and the critical, in ways attuned to interdisciplinary, feminist histories" (13). The inclusion of my own maternal subjectivity is intended as a similar provocation motivated by a feminist impulse to inscribe my own motherhood into both academic and textual spaces. I

envision it as a discursive performance of my motherhood within the text of the dissertation and, as Fournier explains, "In performative writing, the writer's memory of their lived experience is one material among others, like the theory and artworks and literary texts they reference" (20). It also acknowledges the myriad ways in which my own experiences as a scholar and mother-who-writes can be conceptualized and refracted through the four paradigms of impossibility, possibility/space, corporeality and subjectivity. But unlike the structured organization of the dissertation, in my lived experience these four categories are perpetually rotating kaleidoscopically, co-existent and often blurred into one-another.

The autotheoretical impulse is also a noteworthy component of most maternal theory. From Adrienne Rich's foundational *Of Woman Born*, Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater," and Daphne de Marneffe's *Maternal Desire*, to Mielle Chandler's essay, "Emancipated Subjectivities and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices," Di Brandt's *Wild Mother Dancing,* Myrl Coulter's 2007 dissertation, and numerous books and essays by Andrea O'Reilly, the practice of centring one's identity as a mother as an integral part of one's intellectual work has a well-established tradition among maternal theorists. In academic discourse, which supposes or presents the illusion of rational objectivity, an objectivity which is itself deeply entrenched in academia's historical complicity with patriarchy, asserting one's subject position as a woman and as a mother continues to be an important and powerful refusal of the general erasure and denigration of the feminine and the maternal in intellectual spaces. As such, it also enacts my own transformation and empowerment as a feminist scholar.

As I summarize the findings of my dissertation and chart my way through my conclusion, I will interweave my own maternal subjectivity, refracting and theorizing my own experiences and the ways in which my readings of the literary texts and the materiality of my life become

mutually generative. This discursive practice also acknowledges the extent to which this academic project would simply not exist without my own motherhood as its foundational pretext. Without my own lived experience as a mother as the architecture undergirding my consciousness, the maternal themes of these texts would likely have remained largely obscure or unexplored. And in a final, material gesture to the intertwining of my motherhood and my PhD, as I write these words, my daughter is logged into her online grade-four class at a computer at the same dining table with me, thanks to the pandemic keeping schools closed for the better part of this past year. Her presence, interruptions, questions, laughter and conversation are inextricable from the words I am currently writing or—for the better part of the day—merely trying and failing to write under what feel like impossible conditions.

**Maternal/Creative Impossibilities**

Dorothy Livesay's early poetic explorations of the impossibilities of being a writer and a mother are—as I explain above—the germinative seeds which gave rise to the entire project. She gave voice not only to her own frustrations as a mother with a creative vocation and a rich inner life, but to the pervasive belief that having children and being a *bona fide* artist is an impossible combination. The "Three Emilys" she idealizes are childless and free, and are able to spend all their time and energy on their art, inspired by the natural world and unencumbered by the mundane concerns of family life. Livesay traverses the divide she perceives between the bohemian ideals of the Romantic artist-figure and the necessities of caring for children and keeping a home. She alternates between longing for the freedom of her artistic idols and valuing the love and human connection she finds within her family life, as a wife and a mother. Anne Wilkinson identifies a similar schism, between her muscled, masculine poet's eye, sparkling with

clarity of vision, and her maternal, woman's eye, obscured with the opacity of milk, soft and indistinct. This division of identities and loyalties felt remarkably familiar, though admittedly I am not a published poet or writer (yet?). But that divide between the philosophical and the materiality of motherhood, between the exploration of abstract ideas and bums that need wiping, is something that I believe every mother with intellect, curiosity and ambition, has deeply felt. There *is* something oppressive about the obligations of maternal care, which, in their immediacy and physicality, are diametrically opposed to the abstractions of scholarship or theory. Motherhood—particularly with small children—exists in the *now*, whereas literary or long-form writing projects and academic ambitions exist in a perpetually-deferred future. I vividly remember one spring afternoon when my daughter was three, and I brought her to campus with me because I needed to pick up a bunch of books at the library. Everything went smoothly until I had finished checking out my mountain of books, and she refused to walk back to the car, as only a three-year-old can. I tried rationalizing with her, bribing her with promises of treats, threatening consequences and feeling, within, a roiling frustration that made me want to cry. Finally, I picked her up, 30 lbs of pissed off, whining toddler on one hip and 50 lbs of books in a bag over the other shoulder, and struggled back to the car, sweating and muttering expletives and inwardly raging against how *impossible* everything was. The moment captured all the difficulty of being a mother in graduate school, weighed down on all sides, stumbling my way forward. And yet. Like Livesay, to be present "To soothe the small lids down to drowsiness / Till childhood sleep perfumes the darkened room" (Livesay *CP* 161), when I would lie in my daughter's bed to read to her and snuggle her to sleep, the blue-green glow of her nightlight suffusing the room, her gentle breathing in my ear and her little arm thrown over my chest, I experienced a deep contentment and sweetness that I wouldn't trade for anything.

Katherine Govier explores these conflicts of the intellectual, creative mother in "The Nighttender," whose central protagonist is the fictional writer Hannah Winters.[162] Govier's Hannah is an elderly, tormented alcoholic who bemoans her failed literary career, even as she finds herself being celebrated among a small but discerning academic and literary community. She serves as a harrowing portrait of the costs of motherhood to one's creativity and the ways in which a woman-artist's vocation can lead to solitude and loneliness, refuting second-wave feminism's defining ethos that women can "have it all." Govier's Hannah seems to suggest that while it may be possible to write and raise children, there is an inevitable price that must be paid. Alice Munro's protagonist Greta in "To Reach Japan," a mother-poet with a two-year-old daughter, also experiences an acute conflict between her mothering and her writing, something which she only articulates when her daughter briefly disappears on a train-ride while Greta is engaged in a tryst. In the guilt that floods in after she finds her daughter, Greta vows to abandon her literary ambitions and devote herself unreservedly to motherhood. Greta thus articulates the perennial conflict between creativity and motherhood, chastising herself for her supposed inattention to her daughter, and conflating her distraction with a new lover with her time and energy spent writing poetry. This transposition of guilt from affairs to writing, which immediately renders writing illicit by association, acknowledges the extent to which both draw her attention away from what she *should* be doing, namely, mothering her child. As such, she articulates the impossibility of writing and mothering, and feels compelled to make a choice between the two, voicing her decision to choose her child. However, the story ends before we can know for sure whether she means this or follows through on this declaration of maternal

---

[162] As I outline in Chapter One, Hannah is modeled on the life of Elizabeth Smart, another Canadian mother-writer whose life and work have also inspired other maternally-themed texts, such as Wendy Lill's 1989 play, *Memories of You*.

devotion. In fact, the ambiguity of the ending, with Greta locked in another extramarital embrace while her daughter stands next to her in the train station, gestures towards the possibility that this supposed choice Greta must make is a false binary. Perhaps she can follow her passions—romantic and literary—with her daughter at her side.

**The Irrepressible Possibilities of the Mother-Artist**

Canadian literature is generously populated by mothers-who-write, from its origins in the nineteenth-century into the present. While mother-writers from earlier periods may not have explicitly explored their experiences of motherhood in their work, nonetheless they raised their children, and developed their talents and pursued their vocations as writers at the same time. Despite Romantic mythologies of the artist that excluded women and mothers, the reality is that those who have felt driven and inspired to write and create art have done so regardless of broader social discourse. Livesay is among the first writers to explicitly capture her maternal experience in her poetry, dedicating poems to her children and centring her motherhood in select texts. And while she meditates on the impossibilities of her roles as mother and artist, she also directs her poetic gaze on her children and on her own experiences in raising them. Among prose-writers, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* is the first novel-length text whose central protagonist is both a writer and a mother, chronicling her struggle for self-actualization and independence, both of which she finally achieves alongside a flourishing literary career and while raising her daughter on her own. Laurence does not shy away from the loneliness and difficulty of living life on one's own terms, beyond the constraints of patriarchy. Audrey Thomas likewise reveals the possibilities of the mother-writer in *Intertidal Life*, with her central character, Alice, a mother to three daughters who is navigating her own sense of loss and solitude in the wake of her divorce.

It is not a coincidence that these new literary explorations of single-motherhood, female autonomy and artistry become prominent during the height of second-wave feminism. And yet, they also reveal something of the costs that women are forced to pay for their decisions to not follow sociocultural scripts for motherhood or partnership. In many instances, they pay an emotional price, suffering through loneliness, marital dissolution and feelings of loss.[163]

Sharon Thesen's "Marine Life, 1970," contained within *The Beginning of the Long Dash*, explores her experiences of motherhood, noting the frustrations and the beauty of raising her son, while also noting the difficulties and eventual end of her relationship with her son's father. Motherhood is afforded space within her creative work, coexisting among a variety of themes. Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* likewise makes space for the maternal, as painter-protagonist Elaine recalls the bodily alienation and dissociation she experiences in pregnancy, the unusual inspiration she derives from her childhood memories while pregnant, and the challenges of returning to her artistic practice after the birth of her first daughter. Though she is unable to paint at all for the first year, she nonetheless eventually begins to carve out space and time for her work as her child grows. The fog and exhaustion of early motherhood is familiar to anyone who has cared for and nurtured an infant, every moment of their days and nights dominated by the baby's frequent wakings, feeding every two to three hours, diaper changes, baths, anxiety about SIDS and fevers, crying for no apparent reason (both baby and mother). I remember one afternoon about a month after my daughter was born, sitting in the driver's seat of the car, parked outside our townhouse, afraid to even open the door lest I disturb my daughter's peaceful nap in

[163] I have noted elsewhere the preponderance of divorce in the majority of the texts of the second-wave (and beyond). While this may outwardly have nothing to do with motherhood, I believe an argument can be made for the difficulty some male partners grapple with when their wives and/or mothers of their children have powerful aspirations and ambitions, artistic or professional. In some texts, the women leave their marriages with determination and purpose, and in others, the women are bereft as they are forced to reimagine and reconstruct their lives without their partners.

the car seat behind me, and feeling a wave of disorienting exhaustion wash over me that was so deep and painful I wondered for the first time in my life if you could actually *die* from this kind of sleep deprivation. She was the kind of baby that only liked to sleep when being held or nestled into her car seat, which worked well during the day, but not so much when my husband and mother-in-law, who was visiting from Peru, were asleep in the middle of the night. I would always be the last one holding my daughter after she nursed, she would fall asleep blissfully in my arms, and as soon as I gently laid her in her bassinet, her eyes would pop open in dismay. I had not had more than two hours of consecutive sleep since she was born, and I ached from my eyeballs to the depths of my bones. Quite simply, the idea of working, reading, writing, eating, socializing, focusing on anything at all beyond the baby and the occasional shower for myself was utterly inconceivable. Motherhood had swallowed me whole. I didn't even feel like a person anymore. I don't remember asking, but I must have, because a day or two later, I had pumped and stored enough milk that my husband and mother-in-law could take the night-shift. I took a cold beer from the fridge, went upstairs and closed every door along the way, to shut out any of her cries that I knew would startle me awake. I poured myself a nearly full bath, grabbed one of the *Maclean's* magazines that had been piling up, unread, and opened the beer. I soaked in the water and read and drank my beer until all the anxiety had slipped away, and then collapsed into my magnificently silent, dark bedroom and slept for seven glorious, uninterrupted hours. When I woke in the morning, the house was silent, and I crept downstairs and found my daughter sleeping peacefully in her crib, and my mother-in-law and husband both asleep side-by-side on top of the blankets in the spare room down the hall. Contemplating my perfect, pink baby, eyes closed under her faint little eyebrows, breathing evenly in the pre-dawn light, I felt the first real,

true rush of joy and well-being as a mother. I was transformed from an anxious, breast-feeding automaton into an actual human being again, capable of experiencing happiness and gratitude.

It comes as no great surprise, then, that with the exception of shorter poems,[164] virtually all the mother-writers who chronicle their experiences of motherhood do so once their children are older. The real impediments presented by physical exhaustion, sleeplessness, the frequency of feedings and diaper changes, makes any kind of extended, in-depth, long-form project virtually impossible with infants and toddlers to care for and nurture. For example, the protagonist in Carol Shields's *Unless* is a writer and translator whose children are teenagers and young adults, as are those of Jeannette Armstrong's artist-protagonist Penny in *Whispering in Shadows*. These mother-artists are able to make space and have energy for their creative projects because their children are older and more independent. This is also corroborated by biographical details provided by the authors themselves, who reflect on the fragmentation of their time, their limited productivity while their children were very small, the importance of paid childcare whenever available and their judicious use of school hours as uninterrupted time for work. Once childcare is established and/ or children begin attending school, mothers are able to carve out the necessary time and space for their creative endeavours.

This mobilization and negotiation of maternal space is essential not only for the creation of the literary texts themselves, but motherhood also emerges as a subject within the texts themselves. Suzanne Buffam's *A Pillow Book* intersperses her own maternal experience and vignettes about her daughter and the amusing things she says with her meditations on Sei Shōnagon. The maternal co-exists and is afforded equal consideration alongside other themes in

---

[164] Suzanne Buffam's *A Pillow Book* was written in bursts in the middle of the night while her daughter was very young (see Chapter Two), and Susan Holbrook's "Nursery" from *Joy is so Exhausting* was also written while she was nursing her young child (see Chapter Three).

their literary works. In this way, the maternal is validated as a subject for creative exploration, as opposed to the discursive silences which traditionally surrounded motherhood. These writers begin to illuminate the mother, her experiences and conflicts, her frustrations and joys. She is afforded space and consideration. In an academic context, I had a similar, empowering realization of the legitimacy of motherhood as a subject for scholarly study. When I was trying to prepare reading lists on the mother-artist and feminism for my second comps exam, I serendipitously received an email from the English department advertising a cross-listed course in Maternal Theory. Until that moment, I had not realized that such a thing existed and as I scanned the course description, taught by Andrea O'Reilly, I was astonished at how relevant it was to my project of the mother-artist in Canada. *This* was the theoretical underpinning I had been searching for. The day I found the aisle in the library devoted to motherhood studies, I literally held my breath as I ran my fingers along the shelves of books. Beyond the importance of maternal theory to my dissertation, I felt validated *as a mother.* This part of myself that had seemed so irrelevant to my intellectual life, that I had tried to relegate to the background, that had seemed so private, so personal, so much my *other* life outside of academia, was suddenly afforded space and elevated to a status alongside all the other scholarly disciplines that I held in a sort of reverent awe. My maternal experiences of love and nurturance, frustration and anxiety, leaking breasts and exhaustion, psychological and marital strain, were things that had been examined, theorized, quantified, qualified and intellectualized. The feeling I had was akin to someone turning the lights on in a room that had been in darkness for years. That these were things that I too could explore in literary texts, and research and write about, to which I could give space and voice, was empowering. Like the mother-writer protagonists of the novels and poetry created by Livesay, Laurence, Atwood, Shields, Armstrong, and Buffam, texts which

were themselves written by mothers, I was able, through my research and writing, to open additional space (however slight) for the maternal in academic discourse. This maternal space—both literary and academic—legitimizes women's roles as mothers, makes their experiences and identities legible and comprehensible, and acknowledges motherhood's worthiness of veneration and immortalization in both art and scholarship.

**These Maternal Bodies: Discursive Corporeality**

The irony of exploring the corporeal in written language is that the acts of reading and writing are—by definition—functions of the mind and abstract thought (notwithstanding the digital manipulation of keyboard keys in writing and the ocular processes of the eye in reading). The exploration and articulation of the body in literature is inevitably itself merely a representation of the haptic immediacy of the corporeal. It is removed from the lived materiality of the body, and yet writers are constantly attempting to render the experiences of embodied life in the written word. In the context of Canadian maternal texts, poetry emerges as a uniquely prominent genre for these literary explorations, reaching back into the 1940s in the case of Livesay's early forays into the maternal, Tostevin's experimental, imagistic poetry of the early 1980s and Brandt's from the early 1990s. It is not until the twenty-first century that the maternal body is addressed more fulsomely and viscerally with representations in the poetry of Croll, Holbrook, Tsiang, and Unrau. The general silence surrounding the maternal body during the height of second-wave feminism is not surprising, considering the general activist and discursive drive towards gender equality, as women sought to free themselves from the biological essentialisms of patriarchy that had constrained and oppressed them for generations. The general belief that the inconvenient exigencies of the body were an impediment that must be transcended

and cast aside in order to lead a full intellectual and professional life has a long theoretical legacy, dating back to the very origins of philosophical discourse. Women's bodies, their corporeal differences from men, and particularly their reproductive capacities, had long been used as a justification for their subjugation under patriarchy. It is therefore not surprising that as second-wave feminism took hold and real social change began to accelerate, women were eager to free themselves from the corporeal and explore other aspects of their experiences.

Notwithstanding the radical exploration of the maternal body in the poetry considered in Chapter Three, this general discomfort with the corporeal, and particularly misogynistic disgust with the female body, continues unabated. In fact, part of what makes these Canadian poets' work so powerful is their very transgressive qualities. Women and girls ingest, very early, sociocultural messages that their bodies are sources of contamination and uncleanliness. And the silences around birth-giving and the post-natal body continue to be shrouded in a secrecy even more complete, one that is bafflingly perpetuated by women and mothers themselves. That we all become coopted into this strange complicity around the silences of the maternal body is something I am still struggling to unlearn. Among my mother-friends, I find that we instinctively lower our voices when we talk about our shared experiences of pregnancy loss and childbirth that are messy, that involve pain and blood and breastmilk; we don't want others to hear. It is private, unspeakable, a secret. Despite the fact that reproduction and childbearing are among the most universal of experiences, the truths of these experiences remain shrouded in silence, are so reluctantly or quietly shared, or are presented via sanitized distortions in popular media. Women's complicit silence in these experiences are perhaps borne of the fact that, as Shildrick and Price note, the reproductive female body is characterized by a "dangerous volatility" which "marks the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason" (3). What

is so remarkable and transgressive, then, about the corporeal poetry of these Canadian mother-writers is their willingness to articulate and immortalize their bodily experiences, presenting them to the (literary) gaze of others. This willingness to share and literary invitation to look is a bold and empowered creative choice, one which can be considered alongside the popularization of birth photography in recent years. Exposing the maternal body, in all its expansiveness and unruly leakiness, remains a revolutionary act. Asserting the presence of these boundless bodies in literary and academic discourse also continues to be a transgressive and radical choice.

Perhaps I am so moved and fascinated by these poetic works because I, myself, felt so oddly dissociated and disoriented throughout my experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. Like any good daughter of a second-wave feminist mother, I spent the first thirty years of my life largely ignoring my body and its processes, beyond its capacities for pain and pleasure. For the most part, I enjoyed a privileged relationship with my healthy body, wherein I was in complete control of it and its activities. With my first pregnancy, however, came the sudden and shocking realization that my body was *doing something* of its own accord and of which I was not in any control whatsoever. This was both exhilarating and disconcerting. In deciding to try to have a baby, my husband and I had set in motion a process that was now unfolding beyond our grasp. That this was taking place within the confines of *my* body suddenly set us apart from one another; I had our baby *within* me. It was beautiful and terrifying, all at once. As most couples pregnant for the first time, we soon told our entire families about this apparently new and novel thing that we had achieved, and it was immediately after hanging up the phone with my 95-year-old grandmother who entreated me to "cherish every moment of my motherhood," that I felt a sudden gush of blood between my legs. If being pregnant had ushered in an understanding of my body being capable of things of which I had little control, miscarriage compounded that

awareness. While I had actively tried to get my body to be pregnant, there was absolutely nothing I could do to make it *stay* pregnant. As the months passed, I mourned that ungrown and unborn baby, secretly and quietly, noting on the calendar what week of pregnancy I would have been at, and feeling as if this grief I felt was somehow wrong, excessive or misplaced. After all, it's not like I had been pregnant for very *long* and I was adamantly pro-choice. In fact, my trailblazing maternal grandmother who had reminded me to cherish motherhood and who died of kidney failure just three months later, who had been a medical doctor and rebuilt her entire life after immigrating from Poland after the Second World War, was always open about having had five abortions along with her three beautiful daughters. But I was in a kind of mourning and there seemed to be no language or space in the world for what I was experiencing. While my grief over my grandmother's death was intelligible and clear, what I felt for my unborn, barely-formed, not-yet-baby was harder to articulate. Like Unrau's speaker from *The Unborn Poems*, I trolled chatrooms and websites late at night, finding a strange, faceless community of women who had also suffered pregnancy loss, and shared this strangely illegible and invisible grief.

Six months later, I got pregnant again, and understanding now the ways in which my body was capable of betrayal, there was fear and hesitancy mixed with my happiness. It was not until my first ultrasound at twelve-weeks, when I saw the blurry, black-and-white, curled human form on the screen with a madly fluttering heartbeat, that I truly believed I was going to be a mother. As my belly grew and I could begin to feel this tiny human move within me, I experienced what Kristeva describes as "the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness" ("Women's" 31). While I didn't have this theoretical language or understanding readily at hand at the time, it explains the strange bodily alienation I felt. I watched my

metamorphosing body with a curious detachment. This was a process that was happening *to* me; my bodily autonomy, my sense of control, were all obliterated in its wake. When I woke up one morning about seven months into my pregnancy to find my t-shirt wet across the chest, it took me a moment to realize that it was *breast milk* and it both fascinated and horrified me to be suddenly seeping and leaking in places where I never had before. My body's sudden "propensity to leak, to overflow the proper distinctions between self and other, to contaminate and engulf" rendered it an object "of fear and repulsion" and generative of "deep ontological anxiety" (Shildrick and Price 3). I was myself, but *not* myself anymore. My body was a cumbersome shape and entity, capable of things I no longer recognized.

My experience of birth was also characterized by a sort of bodily dissociation, where a multitude of things happened *to* me, and I never once felt in control of the process as it unfolded. I went into labour three weeks before my due date, and when I arrived at the hospital, my blood pressure was dangerously high and I was immediately hooked up to a fetal monitor and a blood pressure cuff, trapping me to the bed. When they broke my water, it was stained with meconium, signaling fetal distress. As the contractions intensified, I experienced waves of hot, sharp, self-obliterating pain wherein time itself vanished, an experience which Atwood, Marlatt, and Croll chronicle so eloquently, writhing and whimpering helplessly on the hospital bed. When relief came in the form of an epidural, I sat on the edge of the bed holding my husband's hands under glaring lights that also felt equally hot and urgent while an anaesthesiologist threaded a hair-thin catheter into my spinal column. They wanted to speed things along because of my blood pressure and the meconium-stained amniotic fluid and gave me Pitocin, which apparently triggered a tsunami of contractions I could no longer feel, as an army of people rushed into the room when the baby's heart rate started falling, turning me over onto my side and adding another fetal

monitor directly to the baby's scalp through my vagina. I was surrounded by wires and catheters and flashing monitors and there was absolutely nothing empowering or fierce or self-directed that was happening. Doctors who came to examine me noted that while I was fully dilated, the baby had not descended into the proper position, and remarked continuously on my "narrow, bony pelvis"—pretty much the last thing any woman in labour wants to hear. When they told me I could try pushing, I realize in retrospect that no one actually believed the baby was going to come out, since it was just one nurse in the room, coaching me to push during the contractions I could not feel but she could see on the monitor. Nothing happened. When the doctor on call finally came in and gave me the rationale for a c-section—my skyrocketing blood pressure, the baby's unstable heart rate and position, the meconium, my apparently ill-suited pelvic anatomy—I felt oddly vindicated; of course my body could not do this crazy thing, who on earth had ever believed it could?

I was wheeled into the operating room alone—my husband had to wait a few minutes for them to set everything up before he was allowed to come in to join me—and I stared up at the operating lights, inert on the table, not having slept in two days. My child was about to be born, and yet as the green surgical drape went up across my chest, I knew what was happening on the other side had nothing to do with me. The sheet formed a literal and figurative barrier between myself and my daughter's birth. This sense of disconnection and dissociation with the experience was broken only by her first cry of life, at which tears of relief poured down my cheeks into my ears. I glimpsed a pink, chubby arm to the left of the sheet as they lifted her to a small examining table and I told my husband urgently, "Go, go be with her," and he disappeared onto the other side of the drape to meet our daughter.

In the recovery room, my mouth was dry as sand and I was struggling to stay conscious—I don't know whether it was the painkillers or blood loss or blood pressure drop, but I have never been so thirsty or had such a hard time staying awake. Nonetheless, as soon as the nurse said, "Whenever you're feeling ready, I'll bring her to you," I said immediately, "I'm ready now." They unwrapped her from her swaddle, four pink, beautiful limbs, a head full of dark hair and a scrunched up, perfect little face, and placed her on my chest. In that moment of warm bodily reencounter, I became her mother.

**Matrifocality, Feminist Mothering and the Integral Maternal**

Becoming a mother was obviously not the first of life's various changes and transitions, but it was the most sudden, complete and inexorable. As I recovered in the hospital for a few days following my c-section, I learned to breastfeed, change diapers and bathe my daughter. I would pace the hallways with the other new mothers, shuffling along in our hospital gowns and slippers, leaking milk from suddenly painful, rock-hard breasts and staring at our new little humans in our arms. As I looked at the cold, winter world beyond the window, I felt like I had crossed a boundary into another life. Talking on the phone to my best friend as I paced the hallway one afternoon, I tried to put into words the transformation I was undergoing, and the best analogy I could conjure was that I felt like my life had abruptly ended, and a new one had begun. I said clumsily, "I almost feel like I died, and was born again." What I was experiencing and trying to describe, which I had no words for, was matrescence, the becoming of a mother (Seltzer n.pag.). But no prenatal class or chapter of *What To Expect When You're Expecting* or anything any woman had told me, prepared me for the dying part of this experience. That part where I said I felt like I had died. Because it *was* a death, a death of my childless self, of my inviolate

autonomy, my singular experience of the world. Sarah M. Seltzer observes that "with every birth, no matter how joyful, there is a loss—the loss of a life unlived, the loss of a former, undivided self, the loss of a degree of physical wholeness" (n.pag.). Now, everything that I did, thought, felt, experienced, dreamed, lamented, built or deconstructed, always kept my daughter in mind. Even when we are not physically together, I am always her mother. *A* mother. The way I interact with my friends' children, smile at babies in cafes, imagine the future—they are all informed by my motherhood. Motherhood transformed my most fundamental sense of my self and how I related to the world. And at the beginning, this required a shocking, earth-shattering destruction of my prior self. The self that prioritized my needs, wants and desires. Of course I had a husband and parents and cousins and friends, but these were all relationships that involved compromise, negotiation, a balancing of needs, a reciprocity. With motherhood, my daughter's needs supplanted my own completely. Bone-tired, weary, shivering with exhaustion, I got up to her cries at four in the morning and put her to my breast, I made sure her onesies and sleepers were always clean, I bathed her, fretted over first fevers and runny noses, hauled stroller and diaper bag everywhere, sweating profusely with the hormonal tides and surges, timing my day around her feedings and naps. I was too tired at the beginning to truly register or contemplate my old self too much, the one who I said had died, but there were strange echoes of her lingering in my consciousness. Beyond that telling statement, that I felt like I had died, I found myself turning to what I thought was a peculiar memory, over and over again, as I tried to quell my anxiety whenever I tried to nap during the day (*sleep when the baby sleeps!* everyone insisted). I pictured myself lying on my blue futon in my apartment in Montreal. I conjured the sound of the rain falling on Aylmer Street outside my window, propped open with a dog-eared copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*. I was twenty years old, I was in my second year of undergrad at McGill, I

could smell the rain and feel the spring breeze blowing in the window. I was alone. This thought soothed me, slowed my breathing. As I disappeared into this very specific place and time in my memory, I could finally fall asleep. Looking back, it makes sense why my Montreal apartment would give me such solace; I was completely free and independent then. I considered no one but myself. I went to classes and studied, talked until dawn with my roommate, went drinking and dancing, had my long-distance boyfriend visit for the weekends or packed a bag to go and visit him. It was a vibrant, joyous time. More than anything, it was *my* time. In marked contrast to motherhood, wherein my selfhood was subsumed and obliterated, I sought refuge in a long-ago time where my autonomy and sense of self was most complete, powerful and assured.

Many of the mother-writers address this transformation in selfhood and self-awareness, particularly Atwood in "Giving Birth," where she discursively conjures the fragmentation and dissolution of the self that motherhood ushers in. The doubling palimpsest of narrative points of view, the projections of fears and anxieties onto an(other)ed maternal shadow-figure and the dislocation of experience from the narrator to the protagonist who is the same/not the same person attempts to capture this slippery destabilization of selfhood that is characteristic of matrescence. Brossard too, explores the shifting psychological and psychoanalytical paradigms of new motherhood, the ways in which it transforms her relationships to her lover, her daughter and herself. Motherhood forces a reckoning which repositions her in the world—among the patriarchal daughters/mothers at the park, she finds herself seeking community but alienated by her lesbianism, and at home, she must reorient herself continuously and corporeally between two different/same women's bodies, one (her daughter's) that she washes, and the other (her lover's) that she caresses. MacDonald's protagonist is likewise unmoored by the demanding transformations of motherhood, which trigger an unearthing of decades-old trauma from her own

childhood. And Lam's collection charts the sometimes painful reorientations of the self that motherhood necessitates, alongside the frustrations and unhappiness that mothers often endure in silence.

Harris's text, however, offers a literary vision of strength and empowerment in motherhood. As she addresses her almost-born daughter, reflects on her maternal lineage, writes poetry and stories, sleeps and dreams, she finds power and inspiration in her impending motherhood. This self-affirming experience of motherhood is intimately connected with discourses of Black motherhood, which—as hooks and Collins elaborate—interpret the maternal as a source of power and community-building, and is borne of centuries of Black resilience in the face of racist violence. It also reveals the extent to which many of the oppressions of motherhood that women continue to struggle against are borne of white, patriarchal, capitalist hegemonies that have dominated Western culture. As O'Reilly argues, "Feminist historians agree that motherhood is primarily *not* a natural or biological function; rather, it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. As a cultural construction, its meaning varies with time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood" (*Rocking* 37). Thus, it is neither inevitable nor unavoidable that motherhood must be oppressive or limiting to women.

The mother-writers who have created matrifocal narratives which demonstrate maternal creativity, agency and strength, who centre the mother in their work and make her consciousness, experiences, affects, conflicts and relationships the foundational elements of the text, are demonstrating that motherhood does not preclude one from artistic creation and can furthermore be a source of empowerment and self-understanding. While the myths of the idealized artist as a male, solitary, "mad genius" continue to circulate, the mother-writers reveal the extent to which

this is just another iteration of patriarchal discourse, an ideology which seeks to silence and subjugate the feminine and the maternal. The mother-writer and her texts are all *possible*, they exist thanks to feminism, to maternal tenacity and strength, to her refusal to be silent despite every sociocultural script telling her she should be self-effacing and invisible. She asserts her presence; her stories matter. These Canadian mother-writers and the protagonists/speakers they create appear to have heeded the advice of Hélène Cixous, who asked rhetorically, "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (Cixous 28).

**"*Mama*. That's me… Yes, that's me": Final Reflections**

Mother-writers form an important part of the Canadian literary canon. Many of Canada's most prominent, acclaimed and studied writers, such as Nobel Laureate Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, and Carol Shields, were mothers, who raised their children alongside their undeniably successful literary careers. In many instances, they wrote about mothers and motherhood, particularly the mother-artist, who embodies the conflicts and possibilities of (pro)creativity. As my project reveals, there is no singular, reductive representation of the mother-artist—she is occasionally depicted as tormented, unhappy and lonely, but much more often, as strong, empowered, creative, productive, imaginative, resistant to patriarchal norms and limitations, and avowedly feminist. The mother-artist not only rewrites expectations of the artist or writer, expanding the conditions wherein art or literature can be created and the subjects that are worthy of canonization or veneration; she also reconceives and reconfigures understandings of what it means to be a mother, expanding what ambitions or dreams are possible for women who choose to mother.

While my project has focused exclusively on mothers and motherhood in the context of literary creation, fathers and fatherhood can be understood as a corollary concern. In the context of the novels and poetry I examine in the preceding chapters, I would argue that in a noteworthy majority of texts, where there are fathers present in the mothers' lives (with obvious exceptions to the lesbian partnerships featured in Holbrook, Brossard, and MacDonald's texts), their relationships are undoubtedly problematic.[165] This theme of untenable conflict among heterosexual partners of mother-writers is too pervasive to be merely coincidental. While the reasons for this dynamic warrant a fulsome study on their own, I would hypothesize that it has much to do with the ways in which these mother-writers are—in their creative ambition, independence and strength—actively rewriting the sociocultural scripts of the self-effacing mother and wife, a transformation that necessitates a partner who must also be willing to be self-reflective, re-think and reconfigure discourses of patriarchal fatherhood, take a more active and equal role in the job of parenting, and truly value their partner's ambition and vocation. That the fathers and partners in these texts seem unable to undergo the necessary changes or the mothers themselves no longer want to be in a relationship with them arguably speaks to their unwillingness to abandon the conveniences and benefits of a patriarchal arrangement of the family and their frustration at their own roles having been disrupted or undermined.

---

[165] Govier's heroine in "The Night-tender" is a broken, alcoholic single-mother; Laurence's Morag has a daughter with Jules who is absent for most of his daughter's life and is unable to support her financially or emotionally; Thomas's narrator in *Intertidal Life* is overcome with anger and grief at her husband's infidelity and his having left her as a newly single-mother of three children; Thesen's speaker in "Marine Life, 1970" obliquely chronicles her marriage's dissolution; Atwood's Elaine in *Cat's Eye* packs up after her husband's infidelity and moves to Vancouver with her daughter, as a single-mother; Armstrong's Penny is a single-mother to three children with the father effectively absent from the text; in *What Matters,* Marlatt charts the course of her failing marriage to her son's father; Harris's speaker, while still married to her unborn child's father, has deep conflicts with him about where to raise their growing family; and Lam's *Enter the Chrysanthemum* likewise features a partnership with the father figure that ultimately falls apart.

I want to say that it is ironic that my marriage of now-eighteen years also suffered over the course of my PhD, but perhaps—considering what I wrote above—it is merely obvious, if not necessarily inevitable. Particularly in the early years of coursework and comps prep, when I worked literally every day of the week, through the weekends and evenings, I implicitly (and often explicitly) insisted that my husband take on more than what he considered his fair-share of childcare. Our entire family life was suddenly and profoundly re-oriented around my deadlines, my need for long stretches of uninterrupted time to work that expanded well beyond my previous Monday-to-Friday job.[166] Whereas before, we had spent our weekends going to parks, restaurants and museums, and hanging out with friends, now I was locked away in the bedroom at my desk, or away at the library or a coffee shop when my daughter was interrupting me too much. My husband tried his best to be supportive, often spending Saturdays and/or Sundays on his own with our daughter, planning activities for them to keep her busy during the day, but he was nursing a simmering resentment and hurt, that I seemed to be sacrificing all my time with them for my new academic career (a nascent, uncertain career as a graduate student that, it must be noted, was further impacting us financially in paying far less than what I had previously been earning as a fundraising writer). In a (perhaps) inevitable emotional cascade, I began to resent him for being resentful. I interpreted it as an egregious lack of support for my dreams and ambitions. We rarely fought, but an emotional chasm opened between us. It ultimately took months with a skilled and compassionate couples' therapist to help us rescue our marriage. But it was jarring and unnerving to see myself and my marital struggles, again, reflected in the texts I

[166] In O'Reilly's article, "I Should Have Married Another Man; I Couldn't Do What I Do Without Him: Intimate Heterosexual Partnerships and their Impact on Mothers' Success in Academe," she observes that academic mothers must "defy and deconstruct traditional partnered relationships particularly as they are manifested in the normative ideology of the ideal wife in both identity and practice" (198). O'Reilly defines the ideology of the ideal wife as one wherein family life is "organized around the career of the husband" and the wife's career "will be necessarily secondary" (198).

was reading. I felt viscerally the ways in which a long, loving marriage can unravel in the face of one partner forcing a renegotiation of its terms. Ultimately, though, we vowed to reconstruct our relationship anew. There was still an ocean of love beneath the hurt, and of course, we had our beautiful daughter.

Our daughter. My daughter. Most foundationally and fundamentally, this project would not exist without her, and without my own identity and role as her mother. As much as the material and temporal demands of motherhood often seemed to function as an impediment to my writing, productivity and success, my own self-awareness and experiences as a mother helped to illuminate the maternal themes and nuanced preoccupations of the texts I studied. As such, my daughter is at the heart of every word on these pages. Her arrival in my life a decade ago irrevocably altered my sense of myself and my self-orientation in the world. It is a cliché, but also true, that being her mother is the most important, profound and transformative thing I have ever done and will ever do. She has expanded my capacities for love, care, compassion, gentleness, patience, sacrifice, wonder and beauty. It is a privilege to nurture her growth, teach her about the world, introduce her to new experiences and people and places, respond to her questions and curiosity, and watch her develop into an intelligent, compassionate, strong-willed young woman. As much as I try to guide her and help her grow up, so much of motherhood is also about letting go, allowing her to develop her own autonomy and individuality and sense of self, and simply marvelling at the person she is in the process of becoming. As mothers, we try to give our children all the best of ourselves, and though we often fail through our own blind-spots and frailties, I ardently hope that my daughter sees, through bearing perhaps the closest witness to my own writing, hard work, striving and perseverance, that no dream or goal—no matter how big or daunting—is impossible. I hope that she learns her strength as a woman and that, should

she choose to be a mother herself one day, she too can continue to nurture her ambitions and self-actualization alongside her mothering. I hope I am setting an example of feminist mothering, in cultivating my own sense of self and purpose, showing her how—while it may be difficult, challenging or outright painful at times—it is possible to combine motherhood with a rich intellectual, professional and aspirational life.

The mother-writers of Canadian literature, who chronicle the impossibilities, possibilities, bodily exigencies and consciousness of motherhood, likewise explode and expand the potentialities of both mothering and literary creativity. Their ascendancy coincides largely with the societal and cultural transformations of second-wave feminism, and accelerates further through the third-wave and into the contemporary moment. Notwithstanding the perennial contentiousness of motherhood within feminist theory and activism, the growing prominence and power of the mother-writer in Canada is intimately connected with feminism and its transformations, as women continue to seek equity within their personal, professional and creative lives, and to give voice and validity to their experiences and stories. Furthermore, as a consequence of the sociocultural impact of feminism and the growing numbers of mothers writing, the Romantic ideal of the free, bohemian, unencumbered (male) artist is revealed to be nothing more than a myth, an imaginary, often internalized limitation borne of the ideology of patriarchy. The truth is that mothers *can and do* write, and have in fact done so since the inception of Canadian literature. In recent decades, they also—more and more often—write *about* their experiences of mothering, immortalizing the affective and bodily elements of motherhood in literature. Maternal subjectivity and consciousness—of which this conclusion forms a tiny part—has thus risen to increasing prominence in cultural, literary and academic spaces in Canada. While it is perhaps not even desirable to attempt to generalize about the innate

qualities or elements of the texts of mother-artist in Canadian literature, reflecting as they do the myriad of human experiences which are in turn refracted through historical, cultural, social, racial and sexual politics, they are united in their commitment to an unflinching honesty about maternal experience and embodiment. The mother-artists that populate the landscape of Canadian literature refuse the trite, saccharine, sanitized depictions of motherhood characteristic of popular culture, and instead boldly and bravely tear back the veil on the ambivalence, messiness, pain, pleasure, potentiality and empowerment of mothering. In doing so, they affirm and legitimize the presence and power of the maternal in literary spaces. Ultimately, the figure of the mother-artist in Canada, in her materiality and representations, is an emblem of feminist resistance and disruption which refuses the silences imposed by patriarchal ideologies and, instead, vociferously declares her presence, strength and power.

**Works Cited**

Abbey, Sharon and Andrea O'Reilly, editors. *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns.* Second Story, 1998.

"ampersand, n." *Oxford English Dictionary. OED Online*. Accessed 9 October 2019.

Amoah, Jewel. "Building Sandcastles in the Snow: Meanings and Misconceptions of the Development of Black Feminist Theory in Canada." *Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspectives on Black Feminist Thought.* Edited by Notisha Massaquoi and Njoki Nathani Wane. IANNA Publications and Education, 2007, pp. 95-118.

Armstrong, Jeannette. *Whispering in Shadows.* Theytus Books, 2004.

Atwood, Margaret. *Cat's Eye.*1988. McClelland-Bantam, 1989.

---. *Dancing Girls.* 1977. Anchor Books, 1998.

---. "Great Unexpectations: An Autobiographical Foreword." *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms.* Edited by Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro. Southern Illinois UP, 1988, pp. xiii-xvi.

---. *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing.* Anchor Books, 2002.

Backhouse, Constance. "The Contemporary Women's Movements in Canada and the United States: An Introduction." *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States.* Edited by Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty, McGill-Queens UP, 1992, pp. 3-15.

Banting, Pamela. "Body Inc.: Daphne Marlatt's Translation Poetics." *Women's Writing and the Literary Institution.* Edited by C. Potvin and J. Williamson in collaboration with S. Tötösy de Zepetnek. Research Institute for Comparative Literature, University of Alberta, 1992, pp. 1-19.

---. "Tremendous Forgeries, Confabulations and Graphologies Elliptical: The Lyric/Anti-Lyric Poetry of Sharon Thesen and Elizabeth Smither. *Australian & New Zealand Studies in Canada 6,* 1991, pp. 112-134.

Barber, Marsha. "An Interview with Dorothy Livesay." *Room of One's Own,* vol. 5, no. 1-2, 1979, pp. 13-34.

Barbour, Douglas. "Writing Through the Margins: Sharon Thesen's and Bill Manhire's Apparently Lyric Poetry." *Australian & New Zealand Studies in Canada 4* (Fall 1990), pp. 72-87.

Battersby, Christine. *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics.* The Women's Press, 1989.

Beardsley, Doug and Rosemary Sullivan. "An Interview with Dorothy Livesay." *Canadian Poetry* 3, 1978, pp. 87-97. *ProQuest.* Accessed 3 March 2017.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex.* 1949. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Vintage Books, 2011.

Beckford, Sharon Morgan. *Naturally Woman: The Search for Self in Black Canadian Women's Literature.* Ianna Publications and Education, 2011.

Beckman-Long, Brenda. *Carol Shields and the Writer-Critic.* University of Toronto Press, 2015.

---. "Genre and Gender: Autobiography and Self-Representation in *The Diviners*." *English Studies in Canada 30.3,* September 2004, pp. 89-110.

Bertacco, Simona. "Writing the Contra-Diction of Two (Canadian) Heritages: Lola Lemire Tostevin's Poetry." *Annali Di Ca'Foscari: Rivista Della Facoltà Di Lingue e Letterature Straniere Dell'Università Di Venezia*, vol. 36, no. 1-2, 1997, pp. 233-55. *ProQuest*. Accessed 15 June 2019.

Billingham, Susan. "Trans-lations: Lola Lemire Tostevin Writing Between Cultures." *Sources: Revue d'Etudes Anglophones,* Vol. 9, Autumn 2000, pp. 111-124.

Bobb-Smith, Yvonne. "'We Get Troo…': Caribbean Canadian Women's Spirituality as a Strategy of Resistance." *Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspectives on Black Feminist Thought.* Edited by Notisha Massaquoi and Njoki Nathani Wane. IANNA Publications and Education, 2007, pp. 55-71.

Borde, Constance and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. "Translators' Note." *The Second Sex.* 1949. Simone de Beauvoir. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Vintage Books, 2011, pp. xvii-xxi.

Bök, Christian. "i, a mother / i am other: *L'Amèr* and the Matter of *Mater*." *Studies in Canadian Literature 16.2,* 1991, N.pag. *ProQuest.* Accessed 27 November 2019.

Brandt, Di. *mother, not mother.* The Mercury Press, 1992.

---. "(Grand)mothering 'Children of the Apocalypse': A Post-postmodernist Ecopoetic Reading of Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*." *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures.* Edited by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010, pp. 253-269.

---. "My Breasts Had Become Eyes." *Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood.* Edited by Shannon Cowan, Fiona Tinwei Lam, Cathy Stonehouse. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008, pp. 53-60.

---. *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature*. University of Manitoba Press, 1993.

Brooks, Kim. "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Mom: Is Domestic Life the Enemy of Creative Work?" *The Cut,* (April 2016). Accessed 7 September 2018.

Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy.* Edited by Charles Bernstein. Roof Books, 1990, pp. 73-86.

---. *These Our Mothers: or: The Disintegrating Chapter.* Trans. Barbara Godard. Coach House Quebec Translations, 1983.

Brossard, Nicole and Daphne Marlatt. "Only a Body to Measure Reality By: Writing the In-Between." *Journal of Commonwealth literature* 31.2, 1996, 5–17. *ProQuest.* Accessed 27 November 2019.

Buffam, Suzanne. *A Pillow Book.* Anansi Press, 2016.

Buss, Helen M. *Mother and Daughter Relationships in the Manawaka Works of Margaret Laurence.* English Literary Studies, University of Victoria, 1985.

Butling, Pauline and Susan Rudy. "On Salvaging: A Conversation with Daphne Marlatt." *Poets Talk: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt, Erin Mouré, Dionne Brand, Marie Annharte Baker, Jeff Derksen and Fred Wah.* Edited by Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy. The University of Alberta Press, 2005, pp.23-42.

Callanan, Andreae. "Motherhood Consumes the Poet: The Literary Consequences of Raising a Child." *The Walrus,* 18 Jul 2016. Accessed 7 September 2018.

Canada. Royal Commission on The Status of Women in Canada. *Report of the Royal Commission on The Status of Women in Canada*. Ottawa: Information Canada, 1970.

Carrière, Marie. *Writing in the Feminine in French and English Canada: A Question of Ethics.* University of Toronto Press, 2002.

Carson, Linda A., et. al. *Mom's the Word.* Talonbooks, 2000.

Casas, Maria Caridad. *Multimodality in Canadian Black Feminist Writing: Orality and the Body in the Work of Harris, Philip, Allen, and Brand.* Rodopi, 2009.

Chakravarty, Radha. "Mothers in Flight: The Space of the Maternal in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*." *Mapping Canadian Cultural Space: Essays on Canadian Literature.* Edited by Danielle Shaub. The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2000, pp. 104-121.

Chandler, Mielle. "Emancipated Subjectivities and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices." *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns.* Edited by Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly. Second Story Press, 1998, pp. 270-286.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender.* University of California Press, 1978.

Cidro, Jaime and Hannah Tait Neufeld. "Introduction: Pregnancy and Birthing: The Essence of Indigeneity." *Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth*, edited by Hannah Tait Neufeld and Jaime Cidro. Demeter Press, 2017, pp. 1-9.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa (1975)." *The Portable Cixous.* Edited by Marta Segarra. Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 27-39.

Clare, Kerry. *The M Word: Conversations about Motherhood*, Goose Lane, 2014.

Cody, Alice Roche. "A Way to Make Sense of the World with Suzanne Buffam." *The Rumpus.* 24 Mar 2017. Accessed 2 March 2021.

Coldwell, Joan. "Introduction." *The Tightrope Walker: Autobiographical Writings of Anne Wilkinson*. University of Toronto Press, 1992, pp. xii-xvii.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood." *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency.* Edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey. Routledge, 1994, pp. 45-65.

---. "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships." *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters.* Edited by Patricia

Bell-Scott, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Janet Sims-Wood, Miriam DeCosta-Willis and Lucie Fultz. Beacon, 1991, pp. 42-60.

Coulter, Myrl Louise. *Feminist, Motherhood, Jane Urquhart, Carol Shields, Margaret Laurence, and Me.* Diss. University of Alberta, Edmonton, 2007.

Cowan, Shannon, Fiona Tinwei Lam and Cathy Stonehouse, editors. *Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood.* McGill-Queen's UP, 2008.

Craddock, Karen T. "Black Motherhood(s): Introduction." *Black Motherhood(s): Contours, Contexts and Considerations.* Edited by Karen T. Craddock. Demeter, 2015, pp. 1-15.

Crane, Dede and Lisa Moore, editors. *Great Expectations: Twenty-Five True Stories about Childbirth.* A List, 2008.

Croll, Su. *Blood Mother*. Signature Editions, 2008.

Cummings, Joan Grant. "Foreword." *Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspectives on Black Feminist Thought.* Edited by Notisha Massaquoi and Njoki Nathani Wane. IANNA Publications and Education, 2007, pp. xiii-xiv.

Curran, Beverley. "Critical Journals: Theory and the Diary in Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt." *A/B: Auto/Biography Studies 15.1*, 2000, pp. 123-140. *ProQuest.* Accessed 27 November 2019.

Daly, Brenda O., and Maureen T Reddy, editors. *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*. University of Tennessee Press, 1991.

Daurio, Beverley. "Patriarchal Mothers: Nicole Brossard." *The Power to Bend Spoons: Interviews with Canadian Novelists.* Edited by Beverley Daurio. Mercury, 1998, pp. 42-48.

Davey, Moyra, editor. *Mother Reader: Essential Writings On Motherhood.* Seven Stories Press,

2001.

Deb, Siddhartha and Dana Stevens. "Are Domestic Responsibilities at Odds With Becoming a Great Artist?" *The New York Times.* 22 Nov 2016. Accessed 9 December 2016.

Denham, Paul. *Dorothy Livesay and Her Works.* ECW Press, 1987.

---. "Lyric and Documentary in the Poetry of Dorothy Livesay." *A Public and Private Voice: Essays on the Life and Work of Dorothy Livesay.* Edited by Lindsay Dorney, Gerald Noonan and Paul Tiessen. University of Waterloo Press, 1986, pp. 87-106.

Dey, Claudia. "Mothers as Makers of Death." *The Paris Review.* 14 August 2018, n.pag. Accessed 15 August 2018.

DiQuinzio, Patrice. *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problem of Mothering.* Routledge, 1999.

Driver, Susan. *Queering Maternal Desires Through Dialogical Relations of Experience.* 2001. York University, PhD Dissertation. *ProQuest.* Accessed 21 October 2020.

Drodge, Susan. *The Feminist Romantic: The Revisionary Rhetoric of* Double Negative*,* Naked Poems*, and* Gyno-Text*.* 1996. Memorial University of Newfoundland, PhD Dissertation. *ProQuest.* Accessed 12 June 2019.

Dumont, Micheline. "The Origins of the Women's Movement in Quebec." *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States.* Edited by Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty, McGill-Queens UP, 1992, pp. 72-89.

Duncan, Patti and Gina Wong. "Introduction: Contextualizing and Politicizing Mothering in East Asian Communities." *Mothering in East Asian Communities: Politics and Practices.* Edited by Patti Duncan and Gina Wong. Demeter, 2014, pp. 1-28. *ProQuest.* Accessed 21 January 2021.

Dunlop, Rishma. *White Ink: Poems on Mothers and Motherhood.* Demeter Press, 2007.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, Indiana UP, 1985.

Eichhorn, Kate and Heather Milne, editors. *Prismatic Publics: Innovative Canadian Women's Poetry and Poetics.* Coach House Books, 2009.

Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women.* 1991. Three Rivers Press, 2006.

Fisher, Sheldon. "Mother, Me, My Daughter: Feminism, Maternité, and the Poetry of Di Brandt." *Wascana Review of Contemporary Poetry and Short Fiction.* Vol 31, No. 1, Spring 1996, pp. 31-48.

Forestell, Nancy M. and Maureen Moynagh. *Documenting First Wave Feminisms: Volume II: Canada: National and Transnational Contexts*, University of Toronto Press, 2014.

Forsyth, Louise H. "Beyond the Myths and Fictions of Traditionalism and Nationalist: The Political in the Work of Nicole Brossard." *Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism: Women Writers of Quebec.* Edited by Paula Gilbert Lewis. Greenwood, 1985, pp. 157-172.

---. "To Write: In the Feminine Is Heavy with Consequences." *Nicole Brossard: Essays on Her Works.* Edited by Louise H. Forsyth. Guernica, 2005, pp. 34-51.

Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism.* The MIT Press, 2021.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique.* 1963. W.W. Norton and Company, 2013.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse." *Feminist Studies 13.1,* Spring 1987, pp. 49-82.

Frye, Joanne S. "Narrating Maternal Subjectivity: Memoirs from Motherhood." *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures.* Edited by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly. Wilfred Laurier UP, 2010, pp. 187-201.

Gabb, Jacqui. "Imag(in)ing the Queer Lesbian Family." *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering 1.2,* 1999, pp. 9-20. *ProQuest.* Accessed 21 October 2020.

Gatens, Moira. "Power, Bodies and Difference." *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader.* Edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. Routledge, 1999, pp. 227-234.

Gerber, Nancy. *Portrait of the Mother-Artist: Class and Creativity in Contemporary American Fiction.* Lexington Books, 2003.

Giardini, Anne. "Introduction: Generosity, Time and Final Advice." *Startle and Illuminate: Carol Shields on Writing*. Edited by Anne Giardini and Nicholas Giardini. Random House Canada, 2016, pp. xv-xxix.

Gibb, Camilla. *This is Happy.* Doubleday Canada, 2015.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination.* Yale UP, 1979.

Gingell, Susan. "Claiming Positive Semantic Space for Women: The Poetry of Dorothy Livesay." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 74, Fall 2001, pp. 1-25.

Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. "Social Constructions of Mothering: A Thematic Overview." *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency.* Edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey. Routledge, 1994, pp. 1-29.

Godard, Barbara. "*L'Amèr* or the Exploding Chapter: Nicole Brossard at the Site of Feminist Deconstruction." *Atlantis 9.2,* Spring 1984, pp. 23-34. *ProQuest.* Accessed 27 November 2019.

Gold, Joseph. "Our Feeling Exactly: The Writing of Alice Munro." *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable: Papers from the Waterloo Conference.* Edited by Judith Miller. University of Waterloo Press, 1984, pp. 1-13.

Gould, Karen. *Writing in the Feminine: Feminism and Experimental Writing in Quebec.* Southern Illinois UP, 1990.

Govier, Katherine. *Fables of Brunswick Avenue.* 1985. Harper Perennial, 2005.

---. "Postscript." *Fables of Brunswick Avenue*. Harper Perennial, 2005, pp. 1-20.

Gordon, Neta. "Putting Ann-Marie MacDonald in the Closet: The Reception of *Adult Onset*." *Studies in Canadian Literature 44.1,* 2019, pp. 81-99. *ProQuest.* Accessed 21 October 2020.

Grace, Sherrill. "A Portrait of the Artist as Laurence Hero." *Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation.* Edited by Christl Verduyn. Broadview, 1988, pp. 162-175.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism.* Indiana University Press, 1994.

Guenther, Bethany. "Carol Shields and Simone de Beauvoir: Immanence, Transcendence, and Women's Work in *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *Unless*." *Studies in Canadian Literature.* 35.1, 2010, pp. 147-164.

Haladay, Jane. "The Grandmother Language: Writing Community Process in Jeannette Armstrong's *whispering in shadows.*" *Studies in Canadian Literature.* 31.1, 2006, pp. 32-48.

Hallstein, D. Lynn O'Brien. *White Feminists and Contemporary Maternity: Purging Matrophobia*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Hannam, June. *Feminism.* Pearson Longman, 2007.

Hardy, Sarah and Caroline Wiedmer. "Introduction: Spaces of Motherhood." *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal Through Politics, Home, and the Body.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 1-11.

Harmer, Liz. "Writer Liz Harmer on Why Motherhood is Not 'The Enemy of Art.'" *The Globe and Mail.* 7 May 2018. Accessed 7 September 2018.

Harris, Claire. *Drawing Down a Daughter.* Goose Lane, 1992.

---. "Poets in Limbo." *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing.* Edited by Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli. Longspoon/NeWest, 1986, pp. 115-125.

Harris, John. "In the Arms of Susan." *Essays on Canadian Writing 43,* Spring 1991, pp. 83-96.

Hays, Sharon. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood.* Yale UP, 1996.

Henry, Astrid. *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism.* Indiana UP, 2004.

Hequembourg, Amy. *Lesbian Motherhood: Stories of Becoming.* Harrington Park, 2007.

Hetherington, Paul and Cassandra Atherton. *Prose Poetry: An Introduction*. Princeton UP, 2020.

Heti, Sheila. *Motherhood.* Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2018.

Hindmarch, Gladys. "'l'amour, l'amour': Thesen, Sharon. The Beginning of the Long Dash / Review." *Brick: A Journal of Reviews 32,* Winter 1988, pp. 40-44. *ProQuest.* Accessed 21 October 2020.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Indiana UP, 1989.

Holbrook, Susan. *Joy Is So Exhausting*. Coach House Books, 2009.

Homans, Margaret. *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson.* Princeton UP, 1980.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, 2nd Ed.* South End, 2000.

Hostetler, Ann. "After Ethnicity: Gender, Voice, and an Ethic of Care in the Work of Di Brandt and Julia Spicher Kasdorf." *After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America.* Edited by Robert Zacharias. University of Manitoba Press, 2015, pp. 86-105.

Howells, Carol Ann. *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

---. *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*, Methuen, 1987.

Huffer, Lynne. "An Interview With Nicole Brossard: Montreal, October 1993." *Yale French Studies 87*, 1995, pp. 115-121. *ProQuest.* Accessed 27 November 2019.

Hunter, Lynette. "After Modernism: Alternative Voices in the Writings of Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Philip." *University of Toronto Quarterly 62.2,* Winter 1992/93, pp. 256-281. *ProQuest.* Accessed 18 August 2020.

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman.* 1974. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. Cornell University Press, 1985.

---. "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother." *The Irigaray Reader.* Edited by Margaret Whitford. Blackwell, 1991, pp. 34-46.

Irvine, Dean. "Introduction." *Heresies: The Complete Poems of Anne Wilkinson, 1924 – 1961.* Edited by Dean Irvine. Vehicule Press, 2003, pp. 19-47.

Jackson, Marni. *The Mother Zone: Love, Sex, and Laundry in the Modern Family.* Henry Holt and Co., 1992.

Jeremiah, Emily. "Troublesome Practices: Mothering, Literature and Ethics. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering 4.2.* 2002, pp. 7-16.

Joseph, Gloria I. "Black Mothers and Daughters: Traditional and New Perspectives." *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters.* Edited by Patricia Bell-Scott, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Janet Sims-Wood, Miriam DeCosta-Willis and Lucie Fultz. Beacon, 1991, pp. 94-106.

Joubert, Ingrid. "Continent of Women: An Interview with Nicole Brossard." Trans. By Jean Sourisseau. *Prairie Fire 10.3,* Autumn 1989, pp. 44-55.

Juhasz, Suzanne. *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition.* Harper and Row, 1976.

Kaplan, Ann E. *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama.* Routledge, 1992.

Keitner, Wendy. "Canadian Women Poets and the Syndrome of the Female Man: A Note on the Poetry of Audrey Alexandra Brown and Anne Wilkinson." *Room of One's Own* 8.4, 1984, pp. 76-81.

Keller, Lynn and Cristanne Miller, eds. *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory.* University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Knutson, Susan. *Narrative in the Feminine: Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard.* Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2000.

Kristeva, Julia. "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident." *The Kristeva Reader.* Edited by Toril Moi. Columbia UP, 1986, pp. 292-300.

---. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. Columbia University Press, 1982.

---. "Revolution in Poetic Language (1974)." *The Kristeva Reader.* Edited by Toril Moi. Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 89-136.

---. “Stabat Mater (1977).” *The Kristeva Reader.* Edited by Toril Moi. Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 160-186.

---. “The System and the Speaking Subject (1973).” *The Kristeva Reader.* Edited by Toril Moi. Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 24-33.

---. “Women’s Time.” *The Kristeva Reader.* Edited by Toril Moi. Columbia University Press, 1986. pp. 187-213.

Kroetsch, Robert. “Sitting Down to Write: A Discourse of Morning.” *Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections.* University of Ottawa Press, 2001, pp. 129-134.

Kuester, Hildegard. *The Crafting of Chaos: Narrative Structure in Margaret Laurence’s* The Stone Angel *and* The Diviners.” Rodopi, 1994.

Kukla, Rebecca. “Pregnant Bodies as Public Spaces.” *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal Through Politics, Home, and the Body.* Edited by Sarah Hardy and Caroline Wiedmer. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 283-305.

Kuwabong, Dannabang. “The Mother as Archetype of Self: A Poetics of Matrilineage in the Poetry of Claire Harris and Lorna Goodison.” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature 30.1,* January 1999, pp. 105-129. *ProQuest.* Accessed 25 June 2019.

Lam, Fiona Tinwei. “Elements.” *Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood,* McGill-Queens UP, 2008, pp. 80-90.

---. *Enter the Chrysanthemum.* Caitlin Press, 2009.

Langston, Jessica. “Writing Herself In: Mother Fiction and the Female Kunstlerroman.” MA Thesis, McGill University. 2004.

Laurence, Margaret. *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir.* 1989. McClelland and Stewart, 1998.

---. *The Diviners.* 1974. McClelland and Stewart, 1993.

Lavell-Harvard, D. Memee and Kim Anderson. "Introduction: Indigenous Mothering Perspectives." *Mothers of the Nations: Indigenous Mothering as Global Resistance, Reclaiming and Recovery.* Edited by Dawn Memee Lavell-Harvard and Kim Anderson. Demeter, 2014, pp. 1-11.

Lecker, Robert. "Better Quick Than Dead: Anne Wilkinson's Poetry." *Studies in Canadian Literature / Etudes en literature Canadienne* 3.1, 1978. N.pag. *ProQuest.* Accessed 25 April 2017.

Lecker, Robert and Jack David. *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada's Major Authors: Volume Four.* ECW Press, 1983.

Lill, Wendy. *Memories of You.* 1988. Talonbooks, 2003.

Livesay, Dorothy. *Archive for Our Times: Previously Uncollected and Unpublished Poems of Dorothy Livesay.* Edited by Dean Irvine. Arsenal Pulp Press, 1998.

---. "At the Back of my Mind (1958-9)." *Room of One's Own* 5.1-2, 1979, pp. 37-41.

---. *Collected Poems: The Two Seasons.* McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972.

---. *Journey With My Selves: A Memoir, 1909-1963.* Douglas & McIntyre, 1991.

---. *The Phases of Love.* Coach House, 1983.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* The Crossing, 1984.

Lupri, Eugen and Donald L. Mills. "The Changing Roles of Canadian Women in Family and Work: An Overview." *The Changing Position of Women in Family and Society: A Cross-National Comparison.* Edited by Eugen Lupri, E.J. Brill, 1983, pp. 43-77.

MacDonald, Ann-Marie. *Adult Onset.* Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2014.

---. "Interview." With Matt Galloway. *Appel Salon*, 1 Oct. 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OheIM97AVU. Accessed 6 November 2020.

Mann, Bonnie. "The Lesbian June Cleaver: Heterosexism and Lesbian Mothering." *Hypatia 22.1,* Winter 2007, pp. 149-165.

Marlatt, Daphne. "Musing with Mothertongue." *Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing.* Edited by Barbara Godard. ECW Press, 1987, pp. 223-226.

---. *What Matters: Writing 1968-70.* Coach House Press, 1980.

Marneffe, Daphne de. *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life.* Little, Brown and Company, 2004.

---. "The 'Problem' of Maternal Desire: Essential Mothering and the Dilemma of Difference." *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings.* Edited by Andrea O'Reilly. Demeter Press, 2007, pp. 668-682.

Massaquoi, Notisha. "Introduction: Future Imaginings of Black Feminist Thought." *Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspectives on Black Feminist Thought.* Edited by Notisha Massaquoi and Njoki Nathani Wane. IANNA Publications and Education, 2007, pp. 5-24.

Maushart, Susan. *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't.* The New Press, 1999.

McCombs, Judith. "Atwood's Fictive Portraits of the Artist: From Victim to Surfacer, From Oracle to Birth." *Women's Studies 12,* 1986, pp. 69-88.

---. "Contrary Re-Memberings: The Creating Self and Feminism in *Cat's Eye*." *Canadian Literature* 129, Summer 1991, pp. 9-21.

McCulloch, Jeanne and Mona Simpson "Alice Munro, The Art of Fiction No. 137." *The Paris Review* 131, Summer 1994, N.pag. Accessed 9 December 2016.

McInnis, Nadine. *Dorothy Livesay's Poetics of Desire.* Turnstone Press, 1994.

McPherson, Karen. "Elle sera personage: Nicole Brossard's Writing of the Self." *Critical Review of Contemporary French Fixxion 4,* 2012, pp. 72-82. *ProQuest.* Accessed 12 November 2019.

McWilliams, Ellen. "Keeping Secrets, Telling Lies: Fictions of the Artist and Author in the Novels of Margaret Atwood." *Atlantis 32.1*, 2007, pp. 26-34.

Mezei, Kathy. "'And We Are Homesick Still': Home, the Unhomely, and the Everyday in Anne Wilkinson." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 30.1, 2005, pp. 160-80. *ProQuest.* Accessed 13 June 2017.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. "Writing Your Body and The Body in Theory." *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader.* Edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. Routledge, 1999, pp. 258-266.

Minthorn, Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah. "Indigenous Motherhood in the Academy, Building Our Children to Be Good Relatives." *Wicazo Sa Review,* Vol. 33, No. 2, Fall 2018, pp. 62-75. *ProQuest.* Accessed 9 February 2021.

"Miscarriage and Stillbirth." *The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada,* pregnancy.sogc.org/other-considerations/miscarriage-and-stillbirth/. Accessed 18 July 2019.

Moi, Toril, ed. *The Kristeva Reader.* Columbia University Press, 1986.

Montefiore, Jan. *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing.* Pandora, 2004.

Morley, Patricia. "Margaret Atwood. *Dancing Girls and Other Stories*. Toronto: McClelland and

Stewart, 1977." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing 17.1,* 1978, pp. 188–190. *ProQuest.* Accessed 18 February 2020.

Morton, Stephen. "The Formation of a Feminist Counterpublic in the Poetics of Lola Lemire Tostevin and Daphne Marlatt. *Contemporary Women's Writing 1:1/2,* December 2007, pp. 151-170. *ProQuest.* Accessed 10 May 2019.

Morris, Mary. "The Art of Fiction 121: Margaret Atwood." *The Paris Review* 117, 1990, pp. 69-88.

Moscovitch, Hannah, et al. *Secret Life of a Mother.* Playwrights Canada Press, 2021.

Moyes, Lianne. "'to bite the bit between the teeth': Lola Lemire Tostevin's Bilingual Writing Practice." *Textual Studies in Canada Vol 5*. Edited by Robert K. Martin and Gabrielle Collu. 1994, pp. 75-83.

Munro, Alice. *Dear Life.* 2012. Penguin, 2013.

Munro, Sheila. *Lives of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro.* McClelland and Stewart, 2001.

Murray, Jennifer. "Love and Anxiety in the Early Postmodern World of Margaret Atwood's *Dancing Girls.*" *E-rea: Revue d'etudes anglophones 8.1,* 2011, n.pag. *ProQuest.* Accessed 18 February 2020.

"Nibbàna." *Oxford English Dictionary. OED Online.* Accessed 3 March 2021.

Olstein, Lisa. "Micro(inter)view with Suzanne Buffam: How Not To Kill The Baby, curated by Lisa Olstein. *Tupelo Quarterly.* 14 Feb 2017. Accessed 2 March 2021.

O'Neill, Angelina and Josie Boyle. "Literary Space in the Works of Josie Boyle and Jeannette Armstrong." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 2.1, 2000, pp. 1-8.

O'Reilly, Andrea. "Coda: 'Stories to Live By': Maternal Literatures and Motherhood Studies."

*Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures.* Edited by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010, pp. 367-373.

---. "Foreword: Writing out of the Margins: Maternity, Marginality, and the Emergence of a Maternal Kunstlerroman. *Portrait of the Mother-Artist: Class and Creativity in Contemporary American Fiction.* By Nancy Gerber. Lexington Books, 2003, pp. ix-xiv.

---. "Introduction." *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born.* State University of New York Press, 2004, pp. 1-23.

---. "I Should Have Married Another Man; I Couldn't Do What I Do Without Him: Intimate Heterosexual Partnerships and their Impact on Mothers' Success in Academe." *Academic Motherhood in a Post-Second Wave Context: Challenges, Strategies, and Possibilities.* Edited by D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein and Andrea O'Reilly. Demeter, 2012. pp. 197-213.

---. *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice.* Demeter, 2016.

---. *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering.* Women's Press, 2004.

---. *Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Motherhood, Feminism and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering.* Demeter Press, 2006.

Osborne, Carol. "Construction the Self through Memory: *Cat's Eye* as a Novel of Female Development." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 14.3, 1994, pp. 95-112.

Ostriker, Alicia. "A Wild Surmise: Motherhood and Poetry." *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood.* Edited by Moyra Davey. Seven Stories, 2001, pp. 155-160.

Pal, Sunanda. "Celebration of the Black Being in Claire Harris's *The Conception of Winter* and *Drawing Down a Daughter*." *Intersexions: Issues of Race and Gender in Canadian*

*Women's Writing.* Edited by Coomi S. Vevaina and Barbara Godard. Creative Books, 1996, pp. 131-141.

Park, Shelley M. *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood: Resisting Monomaternalism in Adoptive, Lesbian, Blended, and Polygamous Families.* SUNY, 2013.

Parker, Alice. "Nicole Brossard: A Differential Equation of Lesbian Love." *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revision.* Edited by Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow. New York UP, 1990, pp. 304-329.

---. "Le mal de mère / The (M)other's Text." *Tessera 14*, 1993, pp. 47-63. *ProQuest.* Accessed 27 November 2019.

Paul, Cathy. "The Maternal as Site of Transformations in Language: *Of Woman Born*, *L'Amèr*, 'Stabat Mater.'" *Textual Studies in Canada*, vol. 7, 1995, pp. 10–15.

Philip, M. Nourbese. "*Dis Place*: The Space Between." *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory.* Edited by Lynn Keller and Christanne Miller. University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 287-316.

Podnieks, Elizabeth. "Matrifocal Voices in Literature." *Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI) Conference.* York University. 13 April 2019. Conference Presentation.

Podnieks, Elizabeth and Andrea O'Reilly. "Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives." *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures.* Edited by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly. Wilfred Laurier UP, 2010, pp. 1-27.

"Political Equality League, Victoria, British Columbia: The Study Club (1912)." *Documenting First Wave Feminisms: Volume II: Canada: National and Transnational Contexts*. Edited

by Nancy M. Forestell and Maureen Moynagh, University of Toronto Press, 2014, pp. 139-142.

Potvin, Elizabeth Ann. "Aspects of the Spiritual in Three Canadian Women Poets: Anne Wilkinson, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Phyllis Webb." Dissertation, McMaster University, 1992, *ProQuest*. Accessed 13 June 2017.

Pratt, Annis. *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*. Indiana UP, 1981.

"Preludium." *Oxford English Dictionary. OED Online.* Accessed 19 November 2019.

Prescott, Tara. "Moths and Mothers: Mina Loy's 'Parturition.'" *Women's Studies 39.3,* 2010, pp.194-214. *ProQuest.* Accessed 12 September 2021.

"Proprioceptor." *Oxford English Dictionary. OED Online.* Accessed 29 May 2019.

Puglise, Nicole. "Marina Abramović says having children would have been 'a disaster for my work.'" *The Guardian.* 26 Jul 2016. Accessed 8 December 2016.

Quiney, Ruth. "Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother: Twenty-first-century Writing on Motherhood as Trauma." *Women: A Cultural Review 18.1,* 2007, pp. 19-40.

Rebick, Judy. *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution.* Penguin, 2005.

Reddy, Maureen T., Martha Roth and Amy Sheldon, eds. *Mother Journeys: Feminists Write About Mothering.* Spinsters Ink Books, 1994.

Relke, Diane A.M. *Literary Mothers and Daughters: A Review of Twentieth-Century Poetry by Canadian Women*. Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 1987.

Renders, Kim. *Motherhood, Madness and the Shape of the Universe.* Playwrights Guild of Canada, 1995.

Ribkoff, Fred. "Daphne Marlatt's 'Rings': An Extension of the Proprioceptive." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 50, Fall 1993, pp. 231-246. *ProQuest.* Accessed 10 May 2019.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution.* 1976. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986.

Rifkind, Candida. *Comrades and Critics: Women, Literature, and the Left in 1930s Canada.* University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Rosenberg, Judith Pierce. *A Question of Balance: Artists and Writers on Motherhood.* Papier-Mache Press, 1995.

Rosenthal, Caroline. *New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban.* Camden House, 2011.

---. "Textual and Urban Spaces in Carol Shields's *Unless*." *Reading(s) from a Distance: European Perspectives on Canadian Women's Writing*. Edited by Charlotte Sturgess and Martin Kuester. Wißner, 2008, pp. 175-186.

Royle, Nicholas. "Quicksand." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Journal Critical Journal 51.4*, Dec 2018, n.pag. *ProQuest.* Accessed 18 February 2020.

Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace.* 1989. Beacon Press, 1995.

Rudy, Susan. "'What There is Teasing beyond the Edges': Claire Harris's Liminal Autobiography." *Essays on Canadian Writing 60,* Winter 1996, n.pag. *ProQuest.* Accessed 25 June 2019.

Rule, Elizabeth. "Seals, Selfies, and the Settler State: Indigenous Motherhood and Gendered Violence in Canada." *American Quarterly,* vol. 70, no. 4. Johns Hopkins UP, 2018, pp. 741-754. *ProQuest.* Accessed 9 February 2021.

Ryan-Flood, Roisin. *Lesbian Motherhood: Gender, Families and Sexual Citizenship.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Sandler, Lauren. "The Secret to Being Both a Successful Writer and a Mother: Have Just One

Kid." *The Atlantic.* 7 Jun 2013. Accessed 7 September 2018.

Sarbadhikary, Krishna. *Dis-Membering/Re-Membering: Fictions by Audrey Thomas.* Books Plus, 1999.

Sardin, Pascale. "Creation and Procreation in Margaret Atwood's 'Giving Birth': A Narrative of Doubles." *Women's Literary Creativity and the Female Body.* Edited by Diane Long Hoeveler and Donna Decker Schuster. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 163-174.

Segarra, Marta, ed. *The Portable Cixous.* Columbia University Press, 2010.

Seltzer, Sarah M. *Lilith 43.3,* Fall 2018, n.pag. *ProQuest.* Accessed 19 March 2020.

Şerban, Andreea. "The Magic of the Eye: Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*." *British and American Studies* 13, 2007, pp. 77-86.

Shahram, Sana Z. "Indigenous Pregnancy, Birthing, and Mothering in Colonial Canada." *Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth.* Edited by Hannah Tait Neufeld and Jamie Cidro. Demeter Press, 2017, pp. 13-29.

Shields, Carol. *Unless*. Vintage Canada, 2003.

Shildrick, Margrit. *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics.* Routledge, 1997.

Shildrick, Margrit and Janet Price, eds. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader.* Routledge, 1999.

Snitow, Ann. "Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading." *Feminist Review* 40, Spring 1992, pp. 30-51.

Srivastava, Prem Kumari. "An Indian Encounter: A Conversation with Jeannette Armstrong." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 37.1, 2012, pp. 232-243.

Stevens, Peter. *Dorothy Livesay: Patterns in a Poetic Life.* ECW Press, 1992.

Stewart, G.B. "Mother, Daughter, and the Birth of the Female Artist." *Women's Studies,* Vol. 6, 1979, pp. 127-145.

Stewart, Grace. *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist As Heroine, 1877-1977*. Eden Press, 1979.

Stovel, Nora Foster. "'Because she's a woman': Myth and Metafiction in Carol Shields's *Unless*." *English Studies in Canada* 32.4, December 2006, pp. 51-73.

---. "(W)rites of Passage: The Typescript of *The Diviners* as Shadow Text." *Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections.* Edited by David Staines. University of Ottawa Press, 2001, pp. 101-120.

---. "Written in 'Women's Ink': French Translation and Female Power in Carol Shield's *Unless*." *Canada and Beyond* 3.1-2, 2013, pp. 219-241.

Strong-Boag, Veronica. "Women's Movements in Canada: 1960-85." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. 12 Sep 16. Accessed 18 July 2017.

---. "Women's Movements in Canada: 1985-present." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. 17 Oct 2016. Accessed 8 August 2017.

Sullivan, Rosemary. *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart: A Life.* Viking, 1991.

Thesen, Sharon. *The Beginning of the Long Dash: Poems.* Coach House Press, 1987.

Thomas, Audrey. *Intertidal Life.* 1984. New Press, 1986.

---. *Latakia.* Talonbooks, 1979.

Thompson, Julie M. *Mommy Queerest: Contemporary Rhetorics of Lesbian Maternal Identity.* University of Massachusetts, 2002.

Thompson, Lee Briscoe. *Dorothy Livesay*. Twayne Publishers, 1987.

Thorpe, Rufi. "Mother, Writer, Monster, Maid." *Vela: Written by Women* n.d.

<http://velamag.com/mother-writer-monster-maid/> Accessed 7 September 2018.

Thurman, Judith. "Introduction." *The Second Sex.* 1949. Simone de Beauvoir. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books, 2011, pp. ix-xvi.

Timothy, Roberta K. "'Third World Women,' 'Women of Colour,' and 'Minority Women': An African/Black Feminist Analysis of Our Identities." *Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspectives on Black Feminist Thought.* Edited by Notisha Massaquoi and Njoki Nathani Wane. IANNA Publications and Education, 2007, pp. 155-176.

Tolan, Fiona. "'Cleaning Gives Me Pleasure': Housework and Feminism in Carol Shields's *Unless*." *Australasian Canadian Studies* 28.1, 2010, pp. 1-15.

Tostevin, Lola Lemire. *Gyno Text.* Underwhich Editions, 1983.

---. "Mistaken Identity: Plenarily Speaking." *Open Letter,* 13th Series, No. 3, Summer 2007, pp. 20-34.

Trehearne, Brian. "Afterword." *Canadian Poetry: 1920 to 1960.* Edited by Brian Trehearne. McClelland and Stewart, 2010, pp. 434-445.

Tsiang, Yi-Mei. *Sweet Devilry.* Oolichan Books, 2011.

Unrau, Melanie Dennis. *Happiness Threads: The Unborn Poems.* The Muses Company, 2013.

Vickers, Jill. "The Intellectual Origins of the Women's Movements in Canada." *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States.* Edited by Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty, McGill-Queens UP, 1992, pp. 39-60.

Wachtel, Eleanor. "An Interview with Audrey Thomas." *Room of One's Own: A Feminist Journal of Literature and Criticism. The Audrey Thomas Issue.* 10.3-4, March 1986, pp. 7-62.

---. *Random Illuminations: Conversations with Carol Shields.* Goose Lane, 2007.

Wade, Eti. "Maternal Art Practices: In Support of New Maternalist Aesthetic Forms." *New Maternalisms: Tales of Motherwork (Dislodging the Unthinkable).* Edited by Roksana Badruddoja and Maki Motapanyane. Demeter, 2016, pp. 274-293.

Wah, Fred. "Subjective as Objective: The Lyric Poetry of Sharon Thesen." *Essays on Canadian Writing 32,* Summer 1986, pp. 114-121.

Walker, Michelle Boulous. *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence.* Routledge, 1998.

Wall, Kathleen. "Representing the Other Body: Frame Narratives in Margaret Atwood's 'Giving Birth' and Alice Munro's 'Meneseteung.'" *Canadian Literature 154,* Autumn 1997, pp. 74-90. *ProQuest.* Accessed 18 February 2020.

Walters, Margaret. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

Wane, Njoki Nathani. "Black-Canadian Feminist Thought: Drawing on the Experiences of My Sisters." *Back to the Drawing Board: African-Canadian Feminisms.* Edited by Katerina Deliovksy, Erica Lawson and Njoki Nathani Wane. Sumach, 2002, pp. 29-53. *ProQuest.* Accessed 23 September 2020.

Ward, Susan. "Morag Gunn in Fictional Context: The Career Woman Theme in *The Diviners*." *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism.* Edited by Greta M.K. McCormick Coger. Greenwood, 1996, pp. 179-85.

Wheeler, Anne-Marie. "Issues of Translation in the Works of Nicole Brossard." *The Yale Journal of Criticism 16.2,* Fall 2003, pp. 425-454. *ProQuest.* Accessed 27 November 2019.

White, Roberta. *A Studio of One's Own: Fictional Women Painters and the Art of Fiction*.

Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2005.

Whiteman, Bruce. "'We Talk Anyway/Being Human': The Poetry of Sharon Thesen." *Essays on Canadian Writing 43,* Spring 1991, pp. 54-66.

Whitford, Margaret, ed. *The Irigaray Reader.* Blackwell, 1991.

Wilkinson, Anne. *Heresies: The Complete Poems of Anne Wilkinson, 1924 – 1961.* Edited by Dean Irvine. Vehicule Press, 2003.

---. *The Tightrope Walker: Autobiographical Writings of Anne Wilkinson.* Edited by Joan Coldwell. University of Toronto Press, 1992.

Williams, Emily Allen. "An Interview with Claire Harris." *Wasafiri* 16.32, 2000, pp. 41–44. *ProQuest.* Accessed 25 June 2019.

---. *Poetic Negotiation of Identity in the Works of Brathwaite, Harris, Senior, and Dabydeen: Tropical Paradise Lost and Regained.* Edwin Mellen, 1999.

Williamson, Janice. "'to pen a trait': The Feminist Reader and the Poetry of Lola Lemire Tostevin." *Line 9,* Spring 1987, pp. 95-108.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own.* 1929. Penguin Books, 2004.

Wunker, Erin. *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy: Essays on Everyday Life.* Bookhug, 2016.

Wyatt-Nichol, Heather, et al. "Balancing Work and Family Life in Higher Education: Best Practices and Barriers." *Academic Motherhood in a Post-Second Wave Context: Challenges, Strategies, and Possibilities.* Edited by D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein and Andrea O'Reilly. Demeter, 2012. pp. 108-126.

Young, Iris Marion. *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory.* Indiana University Press, 1990.

Zacharias, Robert. *Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites and Migration in Canadian*

*Literature.* University of Manitoba Press, 2013.

Zackodnik, Teresa. "'Writing Home': Claire Harris's *Drawing Down a Daughter*." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature 30.3,* July 1999, pp. 163-190. ProQuest. Accessed 29 June 2019.

Zimmerman, Susan. "Livesay's Houses." *Canadian Literature* 61, Summer 1974, 32-45.