University of Southampton

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Department of English

Contemporary Narratives of Motherhood: Temporality, Reparation and Subjectivity

By

Mariana Thomas

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2019

University of Southampton

Abstract

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Department of English

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Contemporary Narratives of Motherhood: Temporality, Reparation and Subjectivity

by

Mariana Thomas

The site of maternal experience remains largely unmapped; this thesis focusses on an emerging strand of maternal writing which explores maternal subjectivity, temporality, and reparation. The thesis conceptualises the altered perceptions and ontological sensations encountered through the mother's intense relation to the child. It begins with a philosophical investigation into the mother as an altered temporal being, in line with Martin Heidegger's notion of temporality. It then turns to an exploration of the mother-daughter relationship, working through the themes of loss, ambivalence, and reparation. In order to theorise the mother-daughter relationship in the texts discussed, it engages with Melanie Klein's theories on mother-infant relations as well as reparation with the lost mother. It conducts a thorough exploration of factors of maternal subjectivity, including interruption, fragmentation of self, alterity, and pregnant consciousness. Finally, it argues that the maternal texts discussed within the thesis justify being theorised as a divergent strand of maternal writing and life-writing through their experimentation with form and queering of motherhood.

Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Mariana Thomas

Title of thesis: Contemporary Narratives of Motherhood: Temporality, Reparation and Subjectivity

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

8. Signature: Date:

Acknowledgements

The writing of this thesis has been inspired and encouraged by my wonderful supervisor, Clare Hanson. I am so grateful for her consistent support, boundless intelligence, and for providing me with an exemplary model for my academic development. I offer thanks to my PhD comrades, Sarah Smyth and Lian Patston, whose daily support and solidarity made this journey considerably easier to travel.

Lindy Dalen provided proofreading assistance and Charlotte Coombe rescued me from certain breakdown by sharing her formatting wisdom. Thank you to Georgia Walker for her decades of friendship; your intelligence and character continue to inspire me. Ben Hackett has been my companion throughout this process, even when that was not a simple task. Thank you for dutifully reading my work even when your eyes began to glaze over and for conveniently leaving on tour during the last month of this project. Special thanks go to Billy Thomas, who really leaned into this project and without whom, it would have been finished about a year earlier. Although she may never read this work, I am indebted to Rosemary Thomas for her love and support.

I cannot adequately express how grateful I am to my mother, Cathy Thomas, who truly inspired and enabled this thesis. She has sustained me throughout this project and has always provided me with a solid foundation. She gave me a passion for literature and women's writing. She taught me the importance of compassion and empathy. This work is dedicated to her, and to all the mothers whose stories are yet to be told.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Growth of Motherhood Studies

> We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than the nature and meaning of motherhood.[1]

The maternal figure and her narrative have been historically maligned within cultural discourse, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and even within feminist theory and activism. When Adrienne Rich wrote her seminal text *Of Woman Born* in 1976, she instructed her reader to differentiate between mothering and the patriarchal institution of motherhood, separating the mothering experience as: 'the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution,* which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control'.[2] Prompted by her own experience as a mother, Rich understood the value of embarking on a feminist approach to mothering in order to gain insight into an experience which leaves a significant imprint upon the life of a woman. With a few exceptions, there has remained a significant paucity of study and writing on the subject of motherhood until relatively recently.

Within feminism, motherhood and the mothering experience has often been rejected as a site of oppression and figure of abjection for women. Many prominent figures of the second-wave, such as, Betty Friedan in her highly influential text *The Feminine Mystique* – who famously referred to motherhood as 'the problem that has no name' - saw motherhood as the ultimate site of gender essentialism and patriarchal control. During this movement, work was done to symbolically and literally separate the woman from the mother, the feminine from the maternal subject, for the sake of the autonomy and liberation of the woman. Of the woman in the patriarchal domestic sphere, Luce Irigaray suggested that she cannot 'control her relation to maternity, unless she reduces herself to that role alone'.[3] Irigaray argued that women have been refused the status of subjects because, as females, they have been equated with the maternal body. Thus, feminist gender deconstruction work was undertaken to free women from the subjugation of biological essentialism and a restrictive domestic role, and the mother was rejected and abandoned. Of the feminist move away from the mother, Samira Kawash observes that the 'deconstruction of "woman" and the poststructuralist account of gender and power left motherhood to the side, an embarrassing theoretical relic of an earlier naïve view of the essential woman and her shadow, the

---

[1] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1976), p. 11.
[2] Rich, p. 13.
[3] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 143.

essential mother'.[4] Maternal theorist Andrea O'Reilly states that 'because feminists are uncomfortable with anything that underscores gender difference and suggests essentialism (i.e., men are naturally this way, and women are naturally this way), motherhood becomes problematic'.[5] In accord, Julie Stephens writes in *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking* that 'the primary focus of the second-wave feminist movement has been one long struggle against essentialism, whether this be biological, cultural or ideological. This makes any discussion linking women and care, or mothering and nurture, particularly troubling'.[6] When the occupations involving care, nurture, and responsibility to another are equated with a loss of autonomous subjectivity within a patriarchal order, and this role is predominantly figured as the domain and responsibility of women, then the maternal will be considered an obstacle to the independent female subject.

In recent decades, the rise of individualism as well as the enduring privatisation of domestic and care work has further separated the figure of the autonomous female subject from the encumbered mother. Returning to Stephens' notion of 'postmaternalism', she holds that if the mother sparks an individual's fear of dependency, as well as economic and social encumberment, then a postmaternal discourse represents a 'fantasy of self-sufficiency'.[7] The fantasy of the modern individual as an 'unencumbered, self-sufficient, rational, and freely choosing agent is thus the antithesis of maternal notions of subjectivity'.[8] In her argument against this approach, O'Reilly contends that the push away from motherhood by some feminists is 'the result of confusing the institution of motherhood with the experience of mothering' laid out by Rich in 1976.[9] In an endeavour similar to the third-wave feminist and womanist movements of the eighties and nineties, which worked to address the lack of intersectionality within feminism, O'Reilly claims that the mother remains the 'unfinished business of feminism'.[10]

Therefore, maternal theorists have been faced with reviving the mother from her position of alienation and obscurity in order to grant her a subjectivity of her own. Lisa Baraitser writes that we must 'repeat the second-wave move to uncouple maternity and femininity [...] not this time for the sake of the feminine, but for the sake of the maternal'.[11] An important step in illuminating and contesting of the paradoxical grounds of modern motherhood from the mother's point of view began with the Sharon Hays' text *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. Published in 1996,

---

[4] Samira Kawash, 'New Directions in Motherhood Studies', *Signs*, 36.4 (2011), pp. 969-1003, p. 972.
[5] Andrea O'Reilly, 'Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers', *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, 10.1 (2019) pp. 13-26, 23.
[6] Julie Stephens, *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking: Feminism, Memory and Care* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 10.
[7] Stephens, p. 7.
[8] Stephens, p. 7.
[9] O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*, p. 21.
[10] O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*, p. 14.
[11] Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (Hove: Routledge, 2009), p. 10.

it lamented the competing Western ideologies of consumerism, capitalism, and individualism, that coexist 'in tension with the cultural model of intensive motherhood'.[12] The intensive model of motherhood is born out of a neoliberal hyper-individualism, the continued sequestration of domestic care, and a notion of the family as the responsibility of the private sphere, a movement begun in the nineteenth century.[13] The principal of intensive mothering, sometimes referred to as the 'new momism', 'rests on at least three core beliefs: 1) children need and require constant and ongoing nurturing by their biological mothers who are single-handedly responsible for meeting these needs; 2) in meeting those needs, mothers must rely on experts to guide them, and 3) mothers must lavish enormous amounts of time and energy on their children. In short, mothers should always put their children's needs before their own'.[14] In *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood*, Linda Rose Ennis claims that 'if a woman has trouble meeting the demands of simultaneously being an excellent mother, worker, and partner, we tend to look at it as an individual failure, and not a failure of workplace environments or governmental policies to address issues related to childcare'.[15] Susan Maushart coined the phrase the 'mask of motherhood' to describe the mother's need to project an outward image of ideal motherhood, and to keep the ambivalence and struggles of mothering hidden from view. Exacerbated by a Western culture of individual responsibility, Maushurt declares that the 'lack of fit between expectations and realities of mothering may be experienced as a personal crisis, but it is ultimately a social tragedy'.[16] More than ever, the realm of motherhood and domesticity has become the responsibility of the individual. Elisabeth Badinter holds that since the freedoms achieved for women since the second-wave feminist movement, such as the contraceptive pill, becoming a mother is, more than ever, seen as a personal choice. Yet, for 'one thing, our belief in having chosen from a position of freedom might be illusory; for another, this assumed freedom burdens women with greater responsibilities at a time when individualism and a "passion for the self" have never been stronger'.[17] Petra Bueksens has argued that while women have achieved massive gains as individuals away from the home, the structure of modern liberalism is predicated on the continued subjugation and sequestration of the wife and mother within the domestic sphere; that the modern social contract is predicated on hidden domestic and care work, still largely undertaken by

---

[12] Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 97.
[13] For further information on the origin of the sequestration of home and work Petra Bueskens' text *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities* provides a useful history.
[14] D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein, 'Second Wave Silences and Third Wave Intensive Mothering', *Mothering and Feminism in the Third Wave*, ed. Amber E. Kinser (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2008), p. 107.
[15] Linda Rose Ennis, *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood* (Ontario: Demeter Press, 2014), p. 31.
[16] Susan Maushurt, *The Mask of Motherhood* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 118.
[17] Elisabeth Badinter, *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* (London: Picador, 2013), p. 15.

women.[18] Bueskens contends that in late modernity 'women are free as 'individuals' and constrained as mothers'; 'This freedom/constraint can be directly related to the contradictions women experience between work and home and between their autonomous and maternal selves.'[19] Bueskens argues that mothers are forced to work a 'second-shift' in order to remain in the paid workforce and retain hard-worn careers while simultaneously providing the majority of parenting labour.

In 2016, O'Reilly further developed the field of motherhood studies by introducing a mother-centred mode of feminism: what she termed matricentric feminism. She argues that if we are to categorise the mother, and thus her problems, as distinct from that of the woman, and to appreciate the lack of feminist attention to maternal disempowerment, then mothers need a feminism of their own. Her work seeks to centralise the mother within a distinct strand of feminism; 'to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers' needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women's empowerment'.[20] O'Reilly argues that by ignoring the study of motherhood, we are ignoring a large portion of female experience. She suggests an intersectional approach to matricentric feminism and understands the mother to be a category as defining to a woman's experience as her race, gender, class, sexuality, or geographical location. The widespread refusal to accept a mother-centred feminist theory is partially based on a denial of the mother as a subject position in her own right. O'Reilly asks why 'maternity is not understood to be a subject position and, hence, not theorized as with other subject positions in terms of the intersectionality of gendered oppression and resistance? Why do we not recognize mothers' specific perspectives as we do for other women, whether they are queer, working class, racialized, and so forth?'.[21]

Setting out her argument for matricentric feminism, O'Reilly works from an assumption: that 'mothering matters and is central to the lives of women who are mothers'; O'Reilly is 'suggesting that any understanding of mothers' lives is incomplete without a consideration of how becoming and being a mother shape a woman's sense of self and how she sees and lives in the world'.[22] This thesis also takes this assumption at the point at which to begin analysis and shares the matricentric feminist aim by putting the maternal experience at the centre of its theoretical investigation.

---

[18] Petra Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), p. 173.
[19] Bueskens, p. 176.
[20] O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*, p. 14.
[21] O'Reilly, p. 20.
[22] O'Reilly, p. 14.

Recovering the Maternal Subject

As well as an increase in a sociological strand of work dedicated to investigating the cultural conditions of contemporary motherhood, there have been developments in feminist investigation into the mothering experience and the maternal subject through the perspective of psychoanalysis and psychology; both fields in which the maternal subject has been generally denied a conceptualisation completely her own. In her investigation of the maternal subject, Maura Sheehy asks an important question:

> Why wouldn't we psychoanalysts want to understand – plunder, even – this affective and psychic landscape, for all the interpersonal, intersubjective, intrapsychic work that gets done here, for the insights into the terrains of pleasure, desire, power, paradox, terror, ambivalence, liminality, hybridity? Why wouldn't philosophy want to access the themes and variations on selfhood and subjectivity that play out in a woman's experience of motherhood?[23]

The mother in psychoanalysis has been and continues to be predominantly figured, or disregarded, as the Other, the tormentor, the container, and ultimately, as somebody the child must abandon in order to survive as a full, unimpeded subject. The mother in psychoanalysis suffers from the child centredness that dominates its inquiry; the maternal subject is considered only in her relation to the development of the child and has rarely been the subject of independent analysis. Baraitser suggests that, even through feminist interpretation, the mother in psychoanalysis risks being returned to her 'traditional object-position as container, mirror, receptacle for intolerable feelings, a body with bits attached, or with supposedly vital bits missing, an object to be repudiated, hated or feared, the one who bears destruction and abandonment and still remains intact'.[24] Ultimately, Baraitser continues, the mother in this interpretation must be 'killed off' so that the subject/child may emerge unscathed.[25] This quote from Baraitser observes many of the traps of denigration or obscurity the mother becomes vulnerable to through psychoanalytic thought. From Oedipas to Electra, psychoanalysis is premised on the child's drama and within it the mother remains a figure 'hopelessly uncertain'.[26] In *The Mother/Daughter Plot,* Marianne Hirsch rails against psychoanalytic feminism for its failure to consider the 'voice of the adult woman who is a

[23] Maura Sheehy, 'Writing of Mothers', in *Women, Mothers, Subjects: New Explorations of the Maternal*, ed. by Maura Sheehy (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 1-12, p. 3.
[24] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 5.
[25] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 5.
[26] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 4.

mother'.[27] As Hirsch works to excavate the figure of the mother from the 'family romance' of psychoanalysis, she returns to the story of Jocasta, the mother of Oedipus, and asks not only 'where the stories of women are in men's plots, but where the stories of mothers are in the plots of sons and daughters'.[28] Hirsch is among a number of feminist psychoanalysts who have taken up the mantel of recovering the mother in psychoanalysis from the inevitability of abjection. Even within most psychoanalytic feminist work, which Hirsch differentiates from feminist psychoanalysis, it 'is the woman as *daughter* who occupies the center of the global reconstruction of subjectivity and subject-object relation. The woman as *mother* remains in the position of other, and the emergence of feminine-daughterly subjectivity rests and depends on that continued and repeated process of *othering* the mother'.[29] It is by moving away from this position that we may begin to theorise the maternal subject and, Hirsch argues, it is through discourse, through voicing her experience, that moves the mother from object to subject status.

Hirsch chooses to distinguish between 'female positions – childless woman and mother, mother and daughter', in order to challenge the 'notion of woman as a singular, unified, transparent category'.[30] Alison Stone concurs with Hirsch's distinction, suggesting that 'for maternal subjectivity to be possible the *mother* must be able to assume a subject-position distinct from that of the daughter'.[31] Stone calls for a different type of subjectivity beyond the usual understanding, premised as it ordinarily is on separation from the mother and an ability to locate oneself as unitary and autonomous to others: 'If breaking from the mother makes possible modern subjectivity in its typical form, conversely re-situating oneself within maternal body relations makes possible a different form of subjectivity. Re-situating oneself, as the mother does, within past maternal body relations that are recurring with a difference makes possible yet another form of subjectivity'.[32] Stone suggests that maternal subjectivity is inherently relational and partially past-facing, and, thus, in psychoanalytic discourse, the mother's subjectivity is nullified; we must make space for a relational form of subjectivity in order to grant the mother hers.

Maternal theorists have been tasked with not only articulating a subjectivity for the mother where there was none before, but with discovering what shape that subjectivity takes. Nicole Ward Jouve argues that women have lost themselves 'in the endlessly diffracted light of Deconstruction [...] we have been asked to go along with Deconstruction whilst we had not even got to the Construction stage. You must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it'; I would argue that this resonates with the unmapped landscape of maternal subjectivity, which has suffered from

---

[27] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 12.
[28] Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, p. 4.
[29] Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, p. 136.
[30] Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, p. 12.
[31] Alison Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 5.
[32] Stone, p. 5.

a lack of investigation and theorisation.[33] Therefore, beyond endowing the mother with a distinct subjectivity where once it was lacking, maternal theorists have begun to 'examine what experiencing her subjectivity means to her'.[34] Susan Kraemer contends that, although the mother has, to a certain extent, been relieved of her 'burdensome posture of selflessness, the question of *how the mother feels about how she feels, and what she does with what she feels*' remains largely undiscovered.[35] If we look beneath the broad strokes which have necessarily laboured to grant the mother a subjectivity, then we may begin to explore the everyday lived experience of maternal subjectivity. One of the most vital interventions into the construction and exploration of the maternal subject is made in Lisa Baraitser's text *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*. In it, Baraitser examines the small moments of undoing experienced by the mother through her daily encounter with the child. These are the moments which, Baraitser theorises, may 'provide us with an articulation of a specifically maternal subjectivity'.[36] The text is inter-disciplinary, working through anecdotal theory, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and cultural phenomenology in order to produce a nuanced approach to the maternal experience. She theorises that something new comes back from the mother's encounter with the child, experienced as both liberating and burdensome, which forms the ground of maternal subjectivity. Like others, Baraitser seeks to develop a maternal subjectivity which is distinct from the experiences of the female subject and is born from the sustained relation to the essentially 'unknowable' child: 'What happens when, not only do we live in close proximity to this irregular, unpredictable and mysterious other, but also we are somehow responsible for them too? What kind of subjectivity emerges?'[37]

Baraitser's approach to defining maternal subjectivity is 'deliberately more myopic' than prior academic investigations, which have undertaken wider studies into the cultural or social circumstance of the mother.[38] Instead, Baraitser seeks to 'isolate key moments of maternal experience that [are] disruptive, but in relatively minor ways', and, by doing so, she works to discover larger truths about 'what this experience may 'offer' a mother that opens her onto the generative, surprising and unexpected; how motherhood indeed makes us anew'.[39] The text investigates the manner in which 'larger issues of responsibility and care [are] played out in the most seemingly ridiculous forums; those of daily 'thinking' about feeding, sleeping, dressing, manners, routines, good stuff, bad stuff, schools, friendships, more stuff, influences, environments,

---

[33] Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 7.
[34] Susan B. Kraemer, '"Betwixt the Dark and the Daylight" of Maternal Subjectivity: Meditations on the Threshold', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 6 (1996), pp. 765-792, p. 768.
[35] Kraemer, p. 768.
[36] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 17.
[37] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 11.
[38] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 7.
[39] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 13, p. 23.

time, responsibility, freedom, control and so on'.[40] Baraitser's simultaneously myopic and far-reaching approach to maternal subjectivity, her use of the small incidents of motherhood alongside their significant effects on the mother's perception of her subjectivity, represents an innovative excavation of maternal subjectivity.

The Maternal Narrative

In 1985, Susan Rubin Suleiman stated that '*mothers don't write, they are written'*.[41] According to Suleiman, this is the underlying assumption in most psychoanalytic theory; the belief that just 'as motherhood is ultimately the child's drama, so is artistic creation': 'In both cases the mother is the essential but silent Other, the mirror in whom the child searches for his own reflection, the body he seeks to appropriate, the thing he loses or destroys again and again, and seeks to recreate'.[42] Suleiman demonstrates that this is an assumption that has played out beyond psychoanalytic discourse: historically, the mother has been absent from literature as a protagonist or as a creator. Returning to Hirsch, she argues that even women writers have mainly opted to write from a 'daughterly' perspective and thus 'collude with patriarchy in placing mothers into the position of object'.[43] Suleiman states that the identities of mother and writer are deemed incompatible in theory and practice, much less the writer who is a mother *and* writes about her motherhood. She cites Roland Barthes, who refers to the writer as 'someone who plays with his mother's body [...] in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it'.[44] Yet, Suleiman asks, 'what about the writer who *is* "the body of the mother"? Is this a foolish question, since mothers too have mothers? Does the mother who writes write exclusively as her own mother's child?'[45] At the time Suleiman was writing, alongside contemporary Hirsch, memoirs on motherhood were thin on the ground; Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Jane Lazarre's *The Mother Knot,* and Phyllis Chesler's *With Child: A Diary of Motherhood* were part of a limited canon. Writing in 1972, Tillie Olsen remarked that: 'Almost no mothers – as almost no part-time, part-self persons – have created enduring literature [...] so far'.[46] In 1985, Suleiman echoed Olsen's observation, demanding that we 'need to have more information – more interviews, more diaries, more memoirs, essays, reminiscences by writing mothers'.[47]

---

[40] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 23.
[41] Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Writing and Motherhood', in *The (M)other Tongue*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 354-377, p. 356.
[42] Suleiman, p. 357.
[43] Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, p. 163.
[44] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 37
[45] Suleiman, p. 358.
[46] Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), p. 19.
[47] Suleiman, p. 362.

Alongside an absence of mothers in literature and culture, Kristi Siegel suggests that autobiography 'has traditionally been a phallic discourse', citing famous male autobiographies, such as St. Augustine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, etc., she suggests that 'its form has been shaped by men's lives and as a genre it has largely been defined by male theorists'.[48] When women do write within the autobiography and memoir tradition, Siegel argues, they do so as daughters within a 'phallic discourse' in which the mother 'functions as a distant mirror'.[49] Hirsch, too, has stated that traditional conceptions of narrative rest on the absence of the mother and are predicated on the 'drama of the father and son'.[50] If women writers engage in autobiography or literature more widely, they have largely been compelled to do so as daughters.

However, since the turn of the twenty-first century, writing on the subject of motherhood has gained a new popularity with women writers and readers. Variously referred to as 'mommy lit', the 'motherhood memoir', or the 'momoir', the predominantly American and British subgenre is written by mothers and generally read by mothers. Alongside the populist rise in maternal writing, many mothers have taken to the internet to create blogs devoted to their motherhood and more recently, 'we have the "mommy mafia" on Instagram, whitewashing (literally) the experience into an overexposed fantasy of spotless children in white linen'.[51] The new motherhood memoirs are aimed at wide audiences, written in accessible language, and emphasise the writers' subjectivity and experience. The texts frequently begin with the author complaining about the lack of material available for teaching women the 'reality' of motherhood; these texts seek to represent an answer to this common grievance. An article in *Time* magazine in 2002 observed that: 'Motherhood has a new voice, and it's not soothing. It's strident; it's furious; it's incredulous; it's dog tired. A generation of women raised on a steady diet of self-determinism and you-go-girlism have had kids. And these competent, successful, articulate femmes are shocked by how hard it is.'[52] These 'mommy memoirs' are written in the climate of 'post-feminism' and are 'confessions of imperfect mothers, surprised by the overwhelming nature of motherhood, trying to find their disappearing independent selves and maintain balance between family and work lives'.[53] The texts protest the

---

[48] Kristi Siegel, 'The Daughters Discourse: The Site of Motherhood', in *Women's Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism,* ed. by Kristi Siegel, (Oxford: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001) pp. 1-35, p.10.
[49] Siegel, p. 8.
[50] Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, p. 53.
[51] Lauren Elkin, 'Why All the Books About Motherhood?', *The Paris Review* (17 June 2018), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/07/17/why-all-the-books-about-motherhood/> [accessed 3 August 2018].
[52] Belinda Luscombe, 'Mommy Talks Back', (5 May 2002), <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,235439-1,00.html> [accessed 5 January 2018].
[53] Ivana Brown, '"Mommy Memoirs": Gender and Motherhood in Popular Literature', *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, 8.1 (2006) pp. 1-22, 3.
Some examples of the popular motherhood memoir are Andrea J. Buchanan's *Mothershock: Loving Every (Other) Minute of it* (2003), Faulkner Fox's *Dispatches from a Not-So-Perfect-Life or How I Learned to Love the House, the Man, the Child* (2003), Lisa Belkin's *Life's Work: Confessions of an Unbalanced Mom* (2002), Susan Cheever's *As Good as I could be: A Memoir of Raising Wonderful Children in Difficult Times*

paradoxes and contradictions of the contemporary institution of motherhood:[54] 'Ideologies of motherhood are in constant circulation', but the creation of texts dedicated to the mothering experience allowed mothers to write 'back to the status quo from the margins'.[55] Yet, O'Reilly holds that 'this literary genre was born from a new ideology of motherhood, what Sharon Hays has termed "intensive mothering" and Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call the "new momism"'.[56] While 'this new ideology made possible a public voice on motherhood, it simultaneously limited what that voice could say on motherhood. [...] many motherhood memoirs do expose motherhood as a patriarchal institution, they do not ultimately denounce or transform this institution'.[57]

Not only are there limitations to these motherhood memoirs in terms of their content, they are also limited by their reading and critical audience. The motherhood memoir has generally been marginalised to the self-help or psychology section and considered of interest only to the mothers who read them. Yelizaveta P. Renfro suggests that despite the influx of writing on motherhood, 'the validity of women's experiences and their abilities to write them are still, in some circles, in question, are pushed to the peripheries by writers who believe that motherhood as a subject is not as worthy as, say, war or politics or sport. The domestic life still stays in the home'.[58] One of the circles from which this popular maternal writing was excluded was that of serious literature: by and large, these texts were relegated to the same space as 'chick lit' and was left out of the literary canon. While the motherhood memoir has succeeded in establishing a new tradition of written maternal voices and protested the contemporary condition of motherhood, arguably, this has remained their limit.

A new strand of maternal writing is emerging which makes a departure from the social and cultural focus of the popular motherhood memoir of the early noughties. While this new form touch upon the social and cultural factors of the institution of motherhood, it is more concerned with the 'pure states of being' associated with the mothering experience.[59] Lauren Elkin remarks that what is 'different about this new crop of books about motherhood is their unerring seriousness, their ambition, the way they demand that the experience of motherhood in all its viscera be taken seriously as literature. They put the mother and her perspective at the center of their concerns. We

---

(2001), Marrit Ingman's *Inconsolable: How I Threw my Mental Health Out with the Diapers* (2005), to name but a few.

[54] Andrea O'Reilly, 'The Motherhood Memoir and the "New Momism": Biting the Hand That Feeds You', in *Textual Mothers, Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures,* ed. Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly, (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 203-215, p. 203.

[55] Justine Dymond, Nicole Willey, 'Introduction: Creating the Collection', in *Motherhood Memoirs: Mothers Creating/ Writing Lives,* ed. by Justine Dymond and Nicole Willey (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2013), pp. 1-30, p. 16.

[56] O'Reilly, 'The Motherhood Memoir and the "New Momism"', p. 205.

[57] O'Reilly, 'The Motherhood Memoir and the "New Momism"', p. 205, p. 209.

[58] Yelizaveta P. Renfro, 'How to Write Motherhood', in *Motherhood Memoirs: Mothers Creating/ Writing Lives,* ed. by Justine Dymond and Nicole Willey (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2013), pp. 48-63, p. 49.

[59] Sarah Manguso, *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2015), p. 91.

have lacked a canon of motherhood, and now, it seems, one is beginning to take shape'.[60] They engage with the maternal subject as the driving force of the narrative, but, beyond this, these texts experiment with form, register, and plot, and use literary techniques traditionally found outside the realm of the motherhood memoir. The writers of these texts adopt stylistic features more commonly found in critical theory, philosophy, poetry, and the personal essay. They represent a development within the form of contemporary maternal writing as well as working within a category of their own. Importantly, they present an ontological account of the maternal experience and retain a critical self-consciousness within their narratives. Like popular motherhood memoirs, they fill a need, but in this case, it is for maternal writing to consider the deeper philosophical questions raised during the maternal experience. The writer Miranda July articulates this need: 'After I had my son I looked everywhere for a book that might serve as some kind of mirror. I bought so many silly books. Now I see what the problem was: I wanted a book about time – about mortality'.[61] These maternal texts are less concerned with the external factors influencing the experiences of their maternal protagonists and instead, hold a magnifying glass over the internal, psychic struggles and joys inherent within the maternal encounter. It is this evolving form of maternal writing which is the focus of this thesis.

Secondary to their influence from the increase in writing about motherhood, the form is written in tandem with a growing trend of life-writing. Within life-writing, we might include the terms autofiction and contemporary memoir, as there is considerable overlap within a genre defined by its looseness. Developed from its roots in classical autobiography, life-writing in the twenty-first century has come about through a diverse range of cultural developments, from psychoanalysis, surrealism, modernism, to post-structuralism. All these influences work to make life-writing and autofiction a genre which is stylistically experimental and views the subject of the text as fluid. Hywel Dix suggests that 'the point of autofiction is not to portray a person's existing subjectivity for all time, but to recognize that subjectivity is elusive and hence to place the subject of narrative endlessly in question'.[62] The memoir, life-writing, and autofiction form have become increasingly enticing to contemporary writers, who are attracted to a form which is 'open-ended, not rule-bound, a flexible form without predictable terminus, rooted in the accidental record-keeping of diaries and correspondence, and in a life that shapes us rather than is ours to shape'.[63] The contemporary memoir, life-writing genre, and autofiction may be particularly attractive to women writers who have become disillusioned with the established critical schools of deconstruction, post-structuralism, and feminism. Through memoir and autofiction these women

---

[60] Lauren Elkin, 'Why All the Books About Motherhood?'.
[61] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. i.
[62] Hywel Dix, 'Introduction: Autofiction in English: The Story so Far', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 1-23, p. 6.
[63] Alex Zwerdling, *The Rise of the Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 5.

writers are able to 'engage in a freer and freeing experimentation with the expression of subjectivity aside from the parameters of those schools'.[64] Indeed, Maggie Nelson, a maternal writer discussed in this thesis, wonders whether it's 'that the generation that was so hysterical about theory – either for or against – has finally passed, and now we can just get back to thinking and writing, taking from whatever source we please'.[65]

The New Maternal Narrative

This project has been guided by a growing trend of maternal writing that continues to develop. While it began with an investigation into twenty first century motherhood memoirs more broadly, it quickly became evident that there was a group of texts emerging from within this bracket which approached the maternal text differently. This thesis does not present an exhaustive exploration of all the texts that may fit into this developing form, but rather analyses a selection of those which share significant stylistic and compositional features and exemplify this emerging form. The aim of this project is twofold: firstly, to investigate the 'pure states of being' of the mother discussed by the writers of the texts and, secondly, to present an analysis on the emergence of an evolving form of maternal writing.

As I have demonstrated, motherhood studies have tended to conduct its analyses through a sociological, cultural, or psychoanalytic lens, beginning vital conversations about the mother within the public and private realm. Its theorists have laboured to insert the mother into areas of critical study in which she was absent, an aim shared with this thesis. Inspired by the maternal writing, this thesis draws the maternal experience back to states of experiential understanding provoked by the engagement between the child and the mother; it discusses the maternal experiences' capacity to provoke an altered relation to time, mortality, subjectivity, futurity, and trauma. It does not deny the immense importance of the social and cultural factors which influence the maternal experience, but it is conceptually driven by maternal writers who draw their narratives back to the somatic and psychological sensations which constitute the everyday and enduring experiences of the mother.

This is an approach shared with Baraitser in her text *Maternal Encounters* and therefore, the analysis in this thesis has greatly benefitted from the work she has already undertaken to 'articulate the potential within maternity for new experiences, sensations, moods, sensibilities, intensities, kinetics, tinglings, janglings, emotions, thoughts, perceptions; new coagulations of embodied and relational modes'.[66] Baraitser leaves maternal subjectivity with space to remain open and

---

[64] Dix, p. 10.
[65] Maggie Nelson, interviewed by Adam Fitzgerald, *LitHub*, 5 May 2015 <https://lithub.com/the-argonauts-diary-theory-poem-memoir/> [accessed 15 August 2019]
[66] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 3.

disordered, as she searches for its manifestations in the 'small incidents' that make up the experience of mothering and that have the potential to be 'curious, odd, enigmatic or surprising'.[67] Because Baraitser works between the mundane and theory, she conceptualises a partial phenomenology of mothering, reasoning that if 'phenomenology seeks to describe conscious experience from a first-person point of view, then human subjectivity is understood as not existing in some space outside of lived experience but rather, that the space of human subjectivity is produced by embodied or lived experience'.[68] With its focus on the lived and embodied experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and maternity, this thesis, too, works within a broadly phenomenological approach. The writers in this thesis are interested in the sensations generated during the intense relation to the developing child, whether it be as a fetus growing within the woman's body or as a child learning its first word.

Before entering into the extended analysis towards which this thesis endeavours, it is crucial to clarify two questions: to who do we refer when we say mother, maternal subject, or maternal experience? And, what is meant by the term maternal text and maternal writing? In answering the first question I do not intend to speak for motherhood studies in general, but rather from the perspective of this thesis alone. There are many ways in which maternal theorists have defined the position of mother. Sarah Ruddick, for instance, disconnects motherhood from sex and designates it as anybody who undertakes maternal practice. Wendy Hollway suggests that fathers do not 'mother' but can learn to care, and thus, 'the maternal subject is understood, then, as a gendered subject who is structured by a relationship to a child'.[69] In this thesis, the maternal subject is defined by her embodied relation to a child that she has gestated and birthed, but this definition is ultimately led by the portrayal of the mother within the maternal texts in question and does not seek to limit maternal subjectivity to these experiences within a wider context. The thesis makes clear that the embodied aspects of maternal experience narrated by the writers *are* integral to their maternal subjectivity and, therefore, does not shy away from them. This is an approach in keeping with O'Reilly's matricentric feminism, in which she argues that we may simultaneously combat the essentialist discourse and work towards a distinct maternal subjectivity. O'Reilly states that 'the apprehension over gender difference has shut down necessary and needed conversations about important – and yes gendered – biological dimensions of women's lives: menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and mothering'.[70] Alongside its focus on the somatic sensations of mothering, the thesis is also concerned with what emerges through a daily and sustained caring relationship with a child. Again, Baraitser's interpretation of the mother is relevant: she uses 'the maternal to signify any relation of obligation between an adult who identifies as female, and

[67] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 14.
[68] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 15.
[69] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 20.
[70] O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*, p. 23.

another person whom that adult elects as their 'child''.[71] Thus, the mother in this thesis fits Baraitser's broader definition as a woman who cares for her child and additionally, as a woman who engages in an embodied relationship with this child. Ultimately, the definition of the maternal in this thesis is dictated by the mother portrayed within the texts. The mothers in all of these texts identify as female, and are middle-class, university educated, Caucasian, in their late thirties to early forties, and work in academia; notably, this is also true for the authors of these maternal texts.

What is the maternal text or narrative? And, to what does maternal writing refer? I will return to O'Reilly's definition of the matrifocal narrative in order to elucidate my own interpretation. Drawing from Miriam Johnson's more general term matrifocality, which refers to any system or society in which the woman as mother has a central and significant function, O'Reilly designates a matrifocal narrative to be one in which 'a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated and valued; it is structurally central to the plot'.[72] The maternal text or narrative in this thesis shares this classification; it need not be written by a mother, although most of them are, but it must use the maternal experience as the central guide to the plot, content, and, in the case of the texts in this thesis, the style and form of the narrative. The maternal writing in this thesis engages first and foremost with the ontological and philosophical questions provoked by all maternal relations, whether it is the mother's relation to her deceased son or with the daughter's relation to her own mother. It engages with motherhood as an enduring condition within a woman's life, which contains many profound and diverse experiences, and therefore, requires a complex and multifarious theorisation.

Chapter Outline

The chapters in this thesis are not arranged according to the texts on which they focus, but rather by the ontological states explored within the texts. Therefore, there are inevitably crossovers between the chapters, in that they all deal with the diverse range of sensations and perceptions prompted by the maternal experience. The chapters draw from a varied group of academic disciplines and schools of thought directed by the states of being portrayed within the maternal texts.

The first chapter explores the capacity for the maternal experience to alter us as temporal beings. It focusses on a range of maternal texts, which demonstrate various stages within the mother-child relation: Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary*, Denise Riley's *Time Lived, Without its Flow*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work*, and Elisa Albert's *After Birth*. The chapter begins with a reading of Julia Kristeva's essay 'Women's Time' and argues that the maternal experience pushes the mother outside of chrononormativity. Following

[71] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 22.
[72] O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*, p. 17.

this discussion, it begins a phenomenological analysis of the maternal temporal sensations portrayed in the texts. In order to theorise the temporal states of the maternal experience it calls upon Martin Heidegger's conceptualisations on temporality and our being in the world, with a particular focus on his notion of the 'moment of vision'. The maternal writers discuss an alteration in their perceptions of themselves as temporal beings, related to mortality, futurity, linear time, and a primordial past, therefore it is perspicuous to analyse these experiences through a philosophical lens and return to foundational studies on the concept on time.

The second chapter in this thesis is dedicated to the mother-daughter relationship within Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, and Elisa Albert's *After Birth*. These texts are linked through their portrayal of an ambivalent relation between the protagonists and their mothers. Heti's text represents the only book in this thesis which is not written by a mother and does not focus on the lived experience of the mother. Instead, it narrates Heti's internal struggle to decide whether or not to become a mother, a psychic journey that primarily explores herself as a daughter to her mother and her mother's relation to her own mother – an element shared with Nelson and Albert's texts. This chapter draws its argument back to the early mother-child relations theory of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, but by using a matricentric approach reads her theorisations through the mother rather than the child. Through her work on the artist Ruth Kjar, Klein has approached the daughter's reparation with the 'lost' mother, a notion articulated within each of the texts. Alongside its engagement with Klein's work on the ambivalent mother-daughter relation, the chapter refers to the concept of intergenerational trauma and 'postmemory', in order to demonstrate that the 'ordinary' conflicts encountered between the mother and daughter in these texts is exacerbated by an inherited maternal trauma. It illustrates the way in which reparation with the mother not only heals past ambivalences associated with mother-infant relations, but also works to heal the 'open wound' of intergenerational trauma and unprocessed mourning.

The third chapter is divided into two sections, each concerned with a question: firstly, what subjectivity arises out of the mother's exchange with the child? And, secondly, how does this subjectivity shape the form of the written maternal narrative? It engages in an in-depth exploration of maternal subjectivity, using Baraitser's work on the maternal subject amongst others. It reads maternal subjectivity through a selection of maternal texts, including Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness*, Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*, Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work*, and Kate Zambreno's collection of essays in *Appendix Project*. This chapter further develops concepts included in the first chapter, such as maternal interruption and repetition, as they play a vital role in defining maternal subjectivity. The second section of this chapter takes the aspects of maternal subjectivity discussed in the first section and parallels them with the form of the maternal text itself. It argues that the sensations felt by the mother are echoed through the form, style, and composition of the written narratives. Through the pairing of experience with form, I argue that these maternal texts represent an innovative and evolving sub-genre.

Chapter 1: Maternal Writing and Temporality

Through a range of women's writing on motherhood, this chapter will explore the ways in which the maternal experience alters temporality. It will argue that the maternal encounter presents an interruption into one's everyday lived experience of time as well as a deeper rupture within the mother's perception of herself as a temporal subject. The chapter will explore the ways in which motherhood pushes the mother outside of her accustomed structures of time, placing her at an altered vantage point and engendering a different consciousness. It will analyse the relationship between temporality and the self as one that is constitutional to our understanding of existence. Through a contextual reading of Julia Kristeva's pivotal essay 'Women's Time', the chapter will begin with an exploration into women's traditional and modern temporality; this will provide a helpful foundation for discussing how motherhood pushes women outside of chrononormativity. It will then turn to a selection of texts which portray the maternal departure from understandings of chrononormativity, exploring the mother's altered sense of temporal being through narratives of pregnancy, childbirth, early motherhood, as well as maternal bereavement. Through an ontological investigation of altered temporality, in line with the style of the chosen texts, it will examine the mother's shifted perspective on futurity, mortality, and the archaic past. Following a thorough discussion of the mother's shift in temporal being, the chapter will apply Martin Heidegger's concept of the 'moment of vision' in order to argue that the momentary and ongoing sensation of temporal alterity engenders a possible new perspective on being. All of these analyses will be undertaken through the concept, put forth in Heidegger's *Being and Time,* that we are fundamentally temporal subjects and thus, changes in our experience of ourselves in time will inevitably alter broader notions of self.

Women's Time

In her seminal work 'Women's Time', Kristeva designates cyclical and monumental time as traditionally associated with female subjectivity, particularly so with the archetypal Mother and the rhythms of biological maternity. Conversely, male subjectivity is considered to be aligned with 'time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding', in other words, the time of industry and work.[73] Monumental or eternal time does not pass - it stands still - and therefore, in relation to linear time, it represents a timelessness. Yet, by 'standing constant outside of linear time as it ceaselessly passes, the eternally-same gains a temporal quality: that of *cutting across* linear time'.[74] It is by the interruption of linear time by monumental time that Kristeva proposes the cyclical

[73] Julia Kristeva, Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, 'Women's Time', *Signs,* 7, 1 (1981), p. 13-35, p. 17.
[74] Stone, p. 138.

develops, as it cuts across the procession of linear time to reproduce the past. Developments since the industrial revolution, significantly the division of the spheres of home and work, have seen linear time become the dominant, standardized form of time. The activities undertaken within the privatised domestic realm are considered to exist on a different 'timezone', binding those doing care work back to 'nature'.[75] Increasingly, in late capitalist society, we see time as a 'line stretching infinitely in both directions – there is no conceivable first or last event – and infinitely divisible into hours, minutes, seconds, milliseconds, and so on *ad infinitum*'.[76] Linear, clock time has become the chrononormative condition of living, defined by Elizabeth Freeman as 'a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts'.[77] The hidden rhythm of forms of temporal experience such as the calendar, the clock, timezones, and schedules, seem natural to whom they privilege - those free from the encumberments of care work or disability. Our dominant forms of temporal experience, those of teleological progression and predictable forward motion, are shaped around the ambitions and lifestyle of the individual in neoliberal society. Progressively, the structures of linear, productive time have come to be regarded as the norm, and anything which exists outside of this structure is considered different or even deviant and excluded from the mainstream cultural narrative.

Since women began entering the paid workforce en-masse in the latter half of the twentieth century, the notion of their temporal personhood has radically changed. In her study on women's employment and time, Karen Davies suggests that women 'have been socialised into a modern, linear time thinking but certain parts of their lives and needs are bound up by a different temporal consciousness. Paid work has become an integral and important part of women's lives, with their assimilation more and more into the labour market. Therewith, their anchorage into a linear and clock time consciousness has become, I would argue, more fixed.'[78] The modern woman arriving at motherhood does so from a temporal position within linear time; Ruth Cain notes of modern mothers, that their 'self-conception before pregnancy is as comparatively genderless beings, a perception reinforced by 'post-feminist' cultural conditions under which the single middle-class woman is encouraged to enter higher education and competitive occupations that promise status and power.'[79] Bueskens has argued that motherhood is the last site of female emancipation, suggesting that women's entrance to the waged workforce as modern individuals remains reliant upon the privatised domestic sphere remaining unchanged. In the introduction to her maternal

---

[75] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, (London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 6.
[76] Stone, p. 137.
[77] Freeman, p. 3.
[78] Karen Davies, *Women and Time and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life* (London: Coronet, 1989), p. 152
[79] Ruth Cain, 'Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother: Twenty-first-century Writing on Motherhood as Trauma', *Women: A Cultural Review,* 18, 1 (2007), p. 19-40, p. 30

memoir, Rachel Cusk admits that: 'Women have changed, but their biological condition remains unaltered'.[80]

The temporal shift from the linear time of modern individualism to a more complex understanding of time upon becoming a mother is portrayed in Sarah Manguso's memoir *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* through her changing relationship to the diary that she has faithfully and obsessively kept since childhood. Before motherhood, Manguso's relationship to her diary and to herself in time is controlled, anxious, and measured, reflecting the wider societal reliance on the centrality of structured, linear time. She regards the diary as a tool to record and retain passing moments, allowing herself to continue into a future free of these events; a future self whom she considers certain and able to anticipate. The diary sustains her ongoing existence: 'Imagining life without the diary, even one week without it, spurred a panic that I might as well be dead'.[81] Manguso's obsession with recording the passing of time, with the numbering of minutes, days, and years, reflects the viewpoint she holds of the formulaic and predictable segmentation of time. She narrativizes her subjectivity into a linear temporality, neatly partitioned into potentially formative moments that have passed: 'All I could see in the world were beginnings and endings: moments to survive, record, and, once recorded, safely forget'.[82] Yet, there is little deference to authenticity in the diary, as she is content to throw away entire years of records which are deemed inconsequential and to continually revise entries, often years after the event. In this way, she gives herself the power to edit herself in the present and past, as well as predict herself in the future: 'I just wanted to retain the whole memory of my life, to control the itinerary of my visitations, and to forget what I wanted to forget'.[83] Through the diary, Manguso attempts to transform her life into a series of autobiographical episodic memories; to organise the disparate parts of herself into a whole, like chapters of a novel.

Maternal Time: Pregnancy and Parturition

The maternal temporal disruption into women's time begins in pregnancy, a process which largely disregards external efforts to control its temporal flow and, instead of clock time, is dictated by mysterious somatic movements. Dana Birksted-Breen notes of pregnancy that the 'very defined time span with its inevitability can feel entrapping to some women. Pregnancy proceeds without respite. There is no going back and no slowing down. The inevitable progression towards childbirth can bring feelings of helplessness, claustrophobia and loss of control'.[84] There is a disjuncture

---

[80] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, pp. 8-9.
[81] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 3.
[82] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 23.
[83] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 40.
[84] Dana Birksted-Breen, 'Peaceful Islands and Dangerous Jungles', *The Maternal Lineage: Identification, Desire, and Transgenerational Issues,* ed. by Paola Mariotti (Hove: Routledge, 2012), p. 68

between the development of the pregnancy itself and the desire to measure and control the mother's changing body by the medical community. During her pregnancy, Cusk's 'womanly movements are being closely monitored' by the medical establishment and she is encouraged to strictly *self*-monitor her behaviour through a campaign of pregnancy propaganda. Like elsewhere, it appears obstetric medicine runs according to linear, clock time and is keen to overrule the cyclical time of pregnancy. It is decided by the consultant that Cusk must undergo a Caesarean section; 'Which day would you like to have it? he asks with a smile. I opt for Wednesday'.[85] Cusk has the sense that he would prefer to grow the baby 'himself in a seed tray', where their developments may be more closely controlled according to a timeframe decided by him. The Caesarean section marks a cumulation of Cusk's disappearing autonomy during her pregnancy, a loss of control orchestrated not by the baby itself, but by the presumption that it is a process which necessitates external management and structure. There is a 'pervasive belief that the gestating, birthing and lactating body is unruly, capricious, and dangerous', and must be overseen by an established structure of timings and measurements.[86]

Elisa Albert presents a dialogue between two mothers in *After Birth*, during which they discuss their respective experiences of labour. The first, Mina, describes her experience of a home birth, with only a disinterested midwife and a friend present:

> *The next part was something else entirely. There were no breaks. So it was continuous, really fast, waves one after the other with no break between: wave crash and the next one is already cresting. Total cacophony, overlapping, you know? So just this crazy storm taking its sweet time with me. Fucking relentless.*[87]

Albert's central character, Ari, remembers her induced hospital labour differently: 'My due date passed, and officially we were behind schedule.'[88] Despite having told her obstetrician that she wanted to 'try' for a natural birth, she listens to his warnings: '*It is upon us to get this show on the road* […] *Baby's gettin' pretty big. Looks pretty well cooked. Don't want him getting bigger. Lots can start to go wrong.*'[89] Albert juxtaposes these accounts as a way to critique the Westernised approach to childbirth – an attitude demonstrated throughout the text - the move away from natural, woman-centric birth, to a sterile and controlled medical procedure lead by obstetric experts. The opposing births are portrayed as taking place in contrasting temporal settings based on who is dictating the temporal narrative of the birth. Mina succumbs to a temporal event which exists

---

[85] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 40.
[86] Pamela Douglas, 'Milkmother Memoir', in *Motherhood Memoirs: Mothers Creating/ Writing Lives,* ed. by Justine Dymond and Nicole Willey (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2013), pp. 105-130, p. 109.
[87] Elisa Albert, *After Birth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2015), p. 112.
[88] Albert, p. 152.
[89] Albert, p. 152.

outside of the structured, organised time of standard medical practice and instead allows labour to layer upon her, continuously, with the unrelenting power of crashing waves. Ari submits in a different way; she hands herself over to the medical team and allows them to structure the birth according to their schedule. Later on, she contemplates the word induce: '*Induce:* trigger, arouse, wheedle into, set in motion, cajole, encourage, prompt, prod, prevail, spur, generate, instigate, trigger, engender, foster, occasion. Move by force.'[90] Through this narrative, Albert suggests that the medical interventions during Ari's labour represent an unnatural rupture or interruption into the primordial temporal flow of childbirth.

The process of gestation is an exercise in the loss of control, for the mother and for those surrounding her. The growth of the fetus happens in its own orbit; its movements are hidden and ethereal. Iris Marion Young suggests that while, from the outside, pregnancy is a time of waiting and watching for a change to happen, for the mother 'pregnancy has a temporality of movement, growth, and change [...] Time stretches out, moments and days take on a depth because she experiences more changes in herself, her body'.[91] Young refers to Ann Lewis' writing on pregnant temporality: 'Were I to lose consciousness for a month, I could still tell that an appreciable time had passed by the increased size of the fetus within me. There is a constant sense of growth, of progress, of time'.[92] Pregnancy is a time of steady progression but in a way unlike that of everyday, clock time, for the pregnant woman measures the movement of her gestation by internal changes and the outward growth of her body. The progression of pregnancy works outside the structures of linear, everyday time, it brings the mother back to a purely somatic journey. Manguso recalls her 'pregnancy brain', that she became lost in chronology, forgetting the details of whether the people she knew, from eighteenth century composers to friend's dogs, were dead or alive. Her pregnancy lifted her outside of chronologically measured time into a temporality of a different kind. For Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts*, it is a corporeal yet obscure sensation beyond the remit of her control; she understands that the baby 'will unfurl as his cells are programmed to unfurl'.[93]

During the labour, there is a similar sense of timelessness, as the night 'passes quickly, in the time that is no time'.[94] The time of childbirth is 'absolutely still'; Phyllis Chesler states that 'I have been here forever. Time no longer exists. Always, Time holds steady for birth. There is only this rocketing, this labor'.[95] Nelson is in a 'pain cavern', briefly existing on a different plane to everybody else. The team around Nelson attempt to use measurements and timings to gauge the procession of the labour but in the end the baby sets the schedule; there are periods in which they

---

[90] Albert, p. 153
[91] Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing like a Girl' and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 55.
[92] Young, p. 55.
[93] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 114.
[94] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 156.
[95] Young, p. 56.

must wait, when the process refuses to advance, which are combined with moments of urgency, all dictated by the baby's movements. During the labour, the relevance of clock time and the timelines of everyday cease to matter: after her son, Iggy, is delivered, Nelson looks back 'at the clock; it is 3:45 a.m.', she has returned from the altered temporality of birth to the world of the clock.[96] In concurrence with Nelson's testimony, Young states that, after the period of growth and somatic change during pregnancy, the birth is experienced as a 'cessation of time': 'There is no intention, no activity, only a will to endure'.[97]

Maternal Time: Interruption

Baraitser argues that temporal interruption is the primary experience of the mother's encounter with the child. From newborn to infancy and beyond, the mother is continuously interrupted by the child in a myriad of ways; from the 'again and again' of the child's cry to the momentous change in the woman's life. Baraitser describes the everyday sensation of maternal interruption as the '*pitilessness of the present tense'.*[98] The constant interruption inherent in motherhood '*constantly re-establishes the present by demanding a response now. The interruption is such that it cannot wait, or it struggles to wait, or teaching it to wait is in itself another interruption'.*[99] The texts referred to in this chapter support Baraitser's claim of maternal temporality; I will illustrate this argument of maternal interruption as well as work to move beyond it, in order to suggest that the maternal experience takes place on an altered temporal field – one that is distinct from the familiar structures of linear time. Rachel Robertson holds that the 'maternal subject is continually pulled into the present by the interruptions of the child [and] presents a challenge to chrononormativity, disrupting ideal linear development and exhibiting a failure to 'fit' within normative time and space'.[100]

The temporal interruption presented by the maternal encounter is portrayed by Manguso as a disruption in her desire and ability to continue writing her diary; for her, motherhood signals the end of the diary and a passage into an altered realm of temporal experience. With motherhood comes an interruption into the dedicated documentation of passing time—an elongation of the present tense and eventually an acceptance of a temporality that is neither controllable nor structured in a way she once recognized. Voicing a familiar admission, Manguso says: 'Sometimes the baby fed at seven thirty and cried again until feeding again at eight thirty. My life had been replaced with a mute ability to wait for the next minute, the next hour. I had no thoughts, no self-

[96] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 166.
[97] Young, p. 56.
[98] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 66.
[99] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 66.
[100] Robertson, Rachel, 'Out of Time: Maternal Time and Disability', *Studies in the Maternal*, 7.1 (2015), pp. 1-13, p. 8.

awareness'.[101] It is timelessness of a different kind to that experienced in pregnancy or labour, instead it is a merged sequence of 'nows'. In Baraitser's words, the 'lived experience of mothering is closer to a seemingly endless series of 'micro-blows'; what I am referring to as breaches, tears or puncturings to the mother's durational experiences bringing her back 'again and again' into the realm of the immediate, the present, the here-and-now'.[102] Manguso reiterates this sentiment, admitting that she begins to regard the sequential movement and control of time as illusory. She observes the marked difference between her unfamiliar maternal self and the students she teaches: 'I no longer believe in anything other than the middle, but my students believe in beginnings.'[103] For Manguso, this alteration in her experience of temporality is closely linked to her experience of memories and is represented in the evolution of her diary. She says of her diary that 'I tried to record each moment, but time isn't made of moments; it contains moments. There is more to it than moments.'[104] Like Baraitser, she is forced to live her life from moment to moment, or, rather, from interruption to interruption, and through this the moments lose their definition, merging into an incoherence. Time for Manguso has changed from the steady progression of passing moments, recorded as distinct memories, into a stretched-out form of ongoingness. In a dream she finds 'an old-fashioned windup metronome' and a man's voice asks: *'Is that really a metronome on your desk?'*[105] The instrument becomes archaic and foreign to her as, through motherhood, Manguso has abandoned the steady marking of time represented by the metronome.

Motherhood provokes an interruption into the accustomed temporal consciousness of the mother, which has a secondary effect of dislocating her from the realm of work and the activities which constituted her pre-maternal life; the two belong in seemingly opposing temporal spheres. Cusk describes herself as 'a divided stream', the tributary of motherhood running a separate course away from the predictable temporality of the past.[106] The mother is required by her baby to be present at all times and this transfers into a form of temporal 'ongoingness' – to borrow Manguso's term - in the mind of the mother. On her daughter's period with colic, Cusk recalls the 'random and frequent' crying, which left her with a confused and dislocated temporality: 'My experience of the regularity of hours and days and seasons has altered so dramatically over the past few weeks that time has become a sort of undifferentiated mass ordered only by the exigencies of the baby's sleeping and waking, her crying and equally baffling contentment'.[107] Through her mothering, Cusk has dropped out of the temporal consciousness of chrononormativity, she is existing in a temporal 'fog' of motherhood, marked only by her daughter's unpredictable interruptions.

---

[101] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 55.
[102] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 68.
[103] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 61
[104] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 5
[105] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 59.
[106] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 56.
[107] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 60.

Following a night of interrupted sleep, she considers that elsewhere 'people have gone to work, to school, while we slept: the world is at its desk. [...] The day lies ahead empty of landmarks, like a prairie, like an untraversable plain'.[108] Like pregnancy and birth, she finds motherhood to be an act which attracts an external need to temporally structure its development and movements. She clambers hopelessly at advice aimed at controlling the length and frequency of feeds and finds that assurances regarding the timing of stages between mother and child are useless. From breastfeeding to sleep, the intense momentum of the encounter with the child evades a formulaic progression of time. The task of motherhood has dislocated Cusk from her accustomed temporality into an unfamiliar temporal consciousness based on the interruptions and demands of her daughter: 'The days pass slowly. Their accustomed structure, the architecture of the past, has gone. Feeds mark them like stakes driven into virgin soil.'[109] For Cusk, it is not experienced as a loss of time, but rather a renewed consciousness of the temporal flow of her past life and the temporal lag she now inhabits; a place which exists on unfamiliar ground. While the prospect of 'chaos is forever imminent,' time, for mother and child, 'hangs heavy on us and I find that I am waiting, waiting for her days to pass, trying to meet the bare qualification of life which is for her to have existed in time'.[110] She is imprisoned within the confines of an altered temporality as if in another country unable to find her way home; she sees young women on the street, 'beautiful and careless,' and she feels abstracted from their lives, 'blown this way and that, careering around like a crazy, febrile gauge trying to find north'.[111]

The first maternal interruption, for Baraitser, is the child's cry (though I would suggest that the initial break in standard temporal experience begins during the sensation of pregnant alterity illustrated in the works discussed). The cry of the child for the mother is the first time she is called into urgency and in its regularity forms the temporal fabric of motherhood. Baraitser contends that the maternal subject is defined as a 'subject of interruption; both she who is subjected to relentless interruption, and she whom interruption enunciates'.[112] The temporal state of interruption is ongoing for the mother, it marks a fundamental change in 'a mother's experience of her temporal being'.[113] Baraitser investigates the root of interruption, as 'an insertion of a break between or among something that is otherwise continuous, which has ongoing movement or flow'.[114] It causes a rupture in the 'so-called 'arrow of time'', transforming it into a series of segments with breaks in between.[115] Brought on by the mother's relation to the child, these breaks or gaps are experienced as both fleeting and unending by the mother, creating a sense of being captured in a prolonged

---

[108] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 63.
[109] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 102.
[110] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 138.
[111] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 138.
[112] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 67.
[113] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 74.
[114] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 68.
[115] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 68.

moment of temporal exteriority which forms the primary condition of mothering. It is a moment in which time loses its stable structure and instead takes on a looping, molten flow. In her collection of essays titled *Appendix Project*, written partially to her deceased mother and to herself as a new mother, Kate Zambreno remarks on the openness of the nursing relation: 'it's fluid, when it begins, when it ends, each session is fluid, and I feel time has been fluid, with the baby, there's no clear demarcations of boundaries, of time, our bodies, the self'.[116]

Beyond the infant's cry in early motherhood, the sensation of temporal interruption persists, becoming the rule rather than the exception; the mother will never be returned to herself free from interruption as the relation to the child continues. In *Time Lived, Without its Flow,* Denise Riley has written of maternal interruption of a different kind: the sudden death of her adult son. Through the loss, Riley's temporal consciousness is again radically altered. She is thrust back into the endless maternal present; she recognizes that 'her old stance is changed […] by the shattering of that underlying intuition of moving in time, which you cannot register until it's collapsed'.[117] Riley describes the sensation of being suspended in the present and existing outside the structures of linear time: 'I've no sense of my time as having any duration or any future. Time now is a plateau.'[118] She insists that the 'threadbare metaphorical remark that 'time stopped'' is inadequate, and, instead, describes her sense of its inherent flow being interrupted or crystallised.[119] It is not timelessness, but temporality comparable to Kristeva's monumental or cyclical time, in that it stands outside of linear time. As Riley remarks, it is a 'curious sense of being pulled right out of time, as if beached in a clear light'.[120]

Maternal Time: Futurity

If a mother is forced to inhabit a lived time in the perpetual present, then what becomes of her perception of the future? Baraitser states that 'the maternal subject bears the suspension of time, a kind of impossible waiting which is the time the child's futurity requires of her'.[121] The mother's sense of futurity is transferred to the unfinished, developing structure of the child. A child who is always rushing ahead into an uncertain future and as such, 'the child is oriented away from the mother, who embodies the child's past'.[122] The mother does not lose her futurity, but it becomes bound up in the developmental time of the child and is constantly in the process of being re-established. In a narrative such as Manguso's, in which she portrays a renegotiation of the futural,

---

[116] Kate Zambreno, *Appendix Project: Talks and Essays* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2018), p. 102.
[117] Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without its Flow* (London: Capsule, 2012), p. 36.
[118] Riley, p. 20.
[119] Riley, p. 9
[120] Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without its Flow,* (London: Capsule, 2012), p. 12
[121] Lisa Baraitser, 'Time and Again: Repetition, Maternity and the Non-Reproductive', *Studies in the Maternal*, 6.1 (2014), pp. 1-7, p. 6.
[122] Stone, p. 141.

the shift of future possibilities towards her son feels like a strange but ultimately hopeful and revelatory passage. After the birth of her son, she comes to realise that 'the mother becomes the background against which the baby lives, becomes time'.[123] Manguso experiences a dual realisation; a recognition of the inconsequentiality of the temporal modes of past, present, and future, as well as a tangibility of the future, not before present, as she sees it taking place within her son. She is suspended in time, with her son racing ahead of her. In one of her dreams, in the blink of an eye her son's teeth have emerged, 'the teeth beating time in months, in years, his full jaws a pink-and-white timepiece'; in another dream, his hair has suddenly grown very long, 'his body had recorded time passing, time that had escaped my notice'.[124]

We might imagine that the cessation in sequential, productive movement pushes the mother into a space of abjection, as it conflicts with a widespread cultural perception of the importance of teleological progression for the modern individual; that the mother is required to give herself over somatically and temporally to the development of the child. Initially, for Cusk, the loss of the firm boundaries of her future self are felt as a profound crisis: 'It is as if some disaster has occurred which has wiped me out [...] I know that there must be some physical future for me, but it's bogged down in planning problems, in administrative backlog. I hold out no great hopes for it in any case'.[125] In keeping with the notion of stagnation, Manguso realises that 'I've basically been the same person since I had my son. I know this is true for all new mothers, especially those that are younger than me (and most of them are). But I feel like a monolith now'.[126] Like the monolith, Cusk feels 'frozen in time', an inhabit of the static past and interminable present.[127] Slowly, Cusk begins to comprehend and acquiesce to her new temporal being as a spectator watching her daughter's 'present become the past,' and to becoming the 'native landscape' for her daughter to take root upon: 'I understand that it means that I am standing still. Motherhood sometimes seems to me like a sort of relay race, a journey whose purpose is to pass on the baton of life'.[128] Manguso understands the infant's perception of the mother to be a 'fixed entity,' somebody who is unchanging and old 'as a state of being'.[129] This is the monolithic figure the child requires of the mother, the receptacle that 'conceives form but lacks form herself'.[130] Though, Manguso and Cusk's maternal narratives do not suggest that the mother forgoes her future but that the manner in which she measures change alters. They no longer feel the weight of the expectation of forward progression and begin to accept that 'the shape of life is elastic': 'I'm not really paying attention to

[123] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 53.
[124] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 63.
[125] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 134.
[126] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 69.
[127] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 134.
[128] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 206.
[129] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 69.
[130] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 59.

what's happening to me anymore – no longer observing steadfastly the things that have changed since yesterday.'[131]

Manguso's text presents the maternal temporal unity and suspension of singular futurity as a release from the temporal anxiety of her past. Similarly, Nelson questions the presumption of 'self-obliteration' on becoming a mother: responding to poet Alice Notley's disclosure that '"he is born and I am undone – feel as if I will / never be, was never born"', Nelson states that 'I have never felt that way, but I'm an old mom. I had nearly four decades to become myself before experimenting with my obliteration'.[132] Manguso's compulsive diary keeping was part of an attempt to control temporality and, through this, construct her notion of selfhood. A way of recording each moment in her life in order to organise them into orderly states of past, present, and future. She notes that:

> Today was very full, but the problem isn't today. It's tomorrow. I'd be able to recover from today if it weren't for tomorrow. There should be extra days, buffer days, between the real days. If I allowed myself to drift through nondocumented time for more than a day, I feared, I'd be swept up, no longer able to remember the purpose of continuing.[133]

With the arrival of her son, Manguso loses the ability to document her own development in the manner to which she is accustomed, but she gains a futural perspective that is less myopic and more expansive. She admits that, although she continues to make diary entries, '*I* is omitted from as many sentences as possible, occurring only for emphasis […] the diary is now mostly about my son.'[134] In 'becoming' time itself Manguso loses a sense of autonomous futurity, but gains an understanding of time as something which acts upon her rather than her having the power to act upon it. Arguably, she becomes *more* future-facing, more content in continuing for the sake of movement, as a result of the abandonment of the memories in the diary which merely represent the past: 'How ridiculous to believe myself powerful enough to stop time just by thinking.'[135]

Riley approaches her narrative from further along the maternal experience, but nonetheless her writing parallels temporal sensations found in early motherhood: looking back she recalls that in 'the past you had sensed your living child's time, including the physically interior time of its gestation as well as its early growing and independent life, as if it were your own. You had aged in tandem with it'.[136] Her perception of futurity is intimately tied to that of her son's; by becoming crystallized in time, as her son has, she may remain temporally connected to him. Riley's memoir

---

[131] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 76, p. 69.
[132] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, pp. 45-46.
[133] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 11
[134] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 54
[135] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 82.
[136] Riley, p.72.

is an exploration of what happens when one's temporal development is indivisible from one's child and when the child's futurity is halted. Whereas, Manguso's narrative is a process of coming to terms with this shift in temporal development to seeing the passing of time as taking place within her son, Riley portrays a rupture in this development and a need to navigate her maternal futurity for a second time.

Riley feels her 'double inner time […] untimely ripped', as she is emptied of her son's temporal futurity, left stranded in a space of uncertainty: 'That was the space of the child's past, which used to lie like an inner shell enveloped by your own time […] a child you grew up with, nested like a Russian doll whose shorter years sat within yours, gave you time that was always layered'.[137] As Manguso begins to come to terms with dual temporality and futurity, Riley finds that hers is undone; her son's death produces a cessation in any movement. She insists that '[t]ime 'is' the person. You're soaked through with it. This enormous lurch into arrested time isn't some philosophical brooding about life's fragility. It's not the same 'I' who lives in her altered sense of no-time, but a reshaped person. And I don't know how she'll turn out'.[138] In reference to Riley's text, Baraitser suggests that 'it is one's relation to everyday life that goes through a dramatic shift, one in which time can no longer unfold predictably or reliably as a crisis has occurred in the reliability that the future will unfold'.[139] Through the death of her son she is forced to comprehend time in a completely different manner: 'No tenses any more […] Instead of the old line of forward time, now something like a globe holds you. You live inside a great circle with no rim.'[140] The future that Riley associates with her son is severed by his disappearance, her 'old stance is changed […] by the shattering of that underlying intuition of moving in time, which you can't register until it's collapsed. If time was once flowing, extended, elongated – a river, a road, a ribbon – now the river is dammed, the road blocked, the ribbon slashed.'[141] But, as with the ruptured time of early motherhood, it is not interpreted as timelessness but rather an altered engagement with time. Baraitser holds that, while the time of the dead is timeless in that 'the dead cannot return and hence time as movement or change is somehow foreclosed by the ongoing deadness of the dead,' Riley maintains a 'lively' temporal relationship with the figure of her lost son. Riley loses her grasp on futurity, but she is not past directed either, rather there are no 'tenses' anymore.[142] Rather than moving forward or backward, she cannot move in 'any decipherable direction'.[143] Riley is impelled to stand aside from the passing of time into the static temporality of the dead.

---

[137] Riley, p. 44.
[138] Riley, p. 46.
[139] Baraitser, 'Time and Again', p. 6.
[140] Riley, pp. 24-25
[141] Riley, p. 36
[142] Riley, p. 24.
[143] Riley, p. 22.

Cusk finds herself searching for north, for the direction of forward travel, in the temporal disorientation of her early motherhood and eventually finds her futurity in the shape of her daughter, 'hurtling towards her future'.[144] Conversely, Riley is jolted from this futural association and returned to the temporal morass of early motherhood: 'I have no sense of any onward opening but stay lodged in the present, wandering over some vast saucer-like incline of land, like the banks of the Lethe, I suppose, some dreary wide plain.'[145] The parallelism of these temporal experiences suggests that it is the effect of 'any life that could be said to unfurl itself inside your own', when 'the maternal subject bears the suspension of time'.[146] Riley refers to her maternal loss as 'a pregnancy run in reverse', like a hollowing out; yet, the death of her son is also a 'partial rebirth', suggesting a link between the way death and birth disrupt the mother's temporal being.[147]

Maternal Time: Mortality

The maternal texts discussed in this chapter all explore questions of the mother's altered relation to mortality, which causes her to discover 'her own existence newly'.[148] Expectant mothers may feel closer to death and mortality, not only through their anxieties over death associated with childbirth but also through the sensation of passing over an intractable barrier. Motherhood is a beginning and an ending simultaneously; it is a realisation that life as it was has come to an end. It begins during pregnancy, a period akin to a long illness, at the end of which the mother suspects she may experience her own psychic or literal obliteration. 'I feel as though I am at the end of my life, drifting in a hushed airy limbo', as the nurse 'ministers to my body, as if for burial', Cusk recalls of the moment before the birth of her daughter.[149] There is a spectral quality to Cusk's descriptions of the birth; she feels estranged from her body, seeing her ghostly face reflected in the lamp above her as her 'soul is being uncaged and allowed to fly away'.[150]

Birth and death are figured as existing on the same realm of consciousness and temporality; each taking place somewhere outside of everyday time. During her labour, Zambreno feels a renewed intimacy with her mother, who died after a long illness, as if, during her contractions, she was reliving her 'childhood, [her mother's] illness, sometimes at the same time': 'I felt I was talking to her. I labored for 24 hours and gave birth in the morning | My mother's two days—that was a labor too |The body has to prepare to die and prepare to give birth.'[151] Like Cusk's uncaged soul, the sensation of birth for Zambreno was like 'some door was open' into another temporal

---

[144] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 206.
[145] Riley, p. 25.
[146] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 6.
[147] Riley, p. 45.
[148] Rich, p. 36.
[149] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 41.
[150] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 42.
[151] Zambreno, p. 81.

consciousness which allowed a renewed closeness to shifting memories. In the brief moment during which birth or death wash over us, time becomes a loose construction and we are able to glimpse ourselves anew. Zambreno has 'an out of body experience', in which she is free to see herself as a naked body writhing on a table and she understands that the loss of autonomy in pregnancy is 'so much like dying'; all privacy retreats, as the door to the world is literally and symbolically opened. It is through the metaphorical door that she can see her past, from her childhood to the death of her mother, her existence flashes before her eyes: 'My mother was there. I needed her there. I felt certain that I was going to die, or that I already had died.'[152] The interruption to the flow of her temporality is possible in that moment because of her insertion into a somatic, animal encounter through the process of labouring to give birth to another life.

Manguso observes that when 'I became a mother. I began to inhabit time differently. It had something to do with mortality'; arguably, *Ongoingness* is as much a meditation on birth as it is on the philosophy of death.[153] Birth and death are connected in the text by juxtaposing the progression of her labour alongside the death of her mother-in-law, who 'was given twenty-four hours to live on the day I was told my cervix was 50 percent effaced'.[154] The connection between these two events predicates Manguso's musings on mortality, memory, and on 'pure states of being'.[155] Similarly, in *The Argonauts,* Nelson draws a direct parallel between the birth of her son and the death of her mother-in-law, suggesting a temporal and experiential link in a similar vein to the work of Manguso and Zambreno. Unlike the death of Manguso's mother-in-law, it is clear that Nelson's labour and the death of her mother-in-law do not occur at the same point in actual time. Therefore, her choice to place the narratives side-by-side in the text clearly illustrates Nelson's belief that despite their distance geographically and temporally, the events inhabit a common temporal plain.

The section of narrative in which Nelson alternates between the birth of her son and the death of her mother-in-law is described as being timeless. As with birth, the time of waiting for death is placed at a conflictual juxtaposition with the timings, measurements, and schedules of everyday life. Nelson's partner Harry, whom the narration switches to during the sections involving his mother's death, is 'desperate to get there in time', yet when he arrives at the hospice where his mother is receiving care, he finds himself waiting, as Nelson waits for her birth.[156] He finds that it takes thirty-three hours to come around to the fact of her imminent death, yet this is really the time it takes him to join her on an altered temporal landscape. After she has passed, he stays 'another 5 hours with her body, alone,' and time seems to fluctuate: 'i felt like i lived a hundred years, a

[152] Zambreno, p. 82.
[153] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 53.
[154] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 51.
[155] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 91.
[156] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 158.

lifetime with her silent, peaceful body [...] the ceiling fan above her was whipping air, holding the space of cycle, where her breath had been. i could've stayed another hundred years right there'.[157] In the room with his dying mother, the 'cycle' of time is held open before her death; the cycle of time which begins with birth and yet, continues endlessly in its looping pattern. The phenomena of birth and death are figured as existing on an altered temporality and as impervious to control through the use of clocks and schedules; they are both events which have the power to untether us from this time.

Riley reports a sensation of stepping into the time of the dead, continuing a temporal dialogue with her deceased son. She exists on a kind of liminal threshold, comparing herself to Orpheus, who was faced back towards the underworld. Like pregnancy and birth, this 'time of the dead themselves' is an 'entirely visceral sensation'.[158] For Riley, the sensation of stepping outside of lived time itself, is not a melancholic sensation but rather in 'your new perception of time, there's a fresh kind of 'carrying forward''.[159] The time of death does not prohibit the future from happening, rather in Riley's perception it is an experience of temporal alterity akin to birth, which removes you from the predictability of time: 'Your previous history has been reshaped as your being in time has now been demarcated differently yet again. Its boundaries are extended by and after death, as they had once been by and after the birth.'[160]

In the descriptions of her labour, Nelson speaks of being in a cavern, which has its own flow of time—the interventions of people surrounding her labouring body doing little to alter its movement. Nelson describes her labour and birth experience as 'touching death', darkly declaring that 'you will have touched death along the way. You will have realized that death will do you too, without fail and without mercy'.[161] It is a consciousness shared with Zambreno who, through the encounter with her child and the loss of her mother, realises that the 'passage of time is the punctum – I understand it now, it is the overall effect, that I was a baby, gazing at my mother the way my baby gazes at me, and that I will die'.[162] The temporal rupture in consciousness that motherhood presents allows us to comprehend time as that which 'retains *repetition* and *eternity*', as we are entered into the cyclical and monumental time theorised by Kristeva. Though Kristeva refers to this as the time of female subjectivity, it might be more appropriate to consider it the time of maternal subjectivity or reproduction, in that 'there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature'.[163] It is a temporality 'whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extrasubjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous

---

[157] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 166.
[158] Riley, p. 28.
[159] Riley, p. 73.
[160] Riley, p. 73.
[161] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 167.
[162] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 41.
[163] Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p. 16.

visions and unnameable *jouissance*'.[164] Kristeva theorises that the 'pregnant or birthing woman renews her connection to the repressed, preconscious, presymbolic aspect of existence'.[165] It is a connection to the monolithic maternal body, a primordial temporal landscape beyond the realm of the symbolic.

Primordial Reconnection

Cusk senses a reconnection to an eternal pre-existence and a 're-enactment' of all past parental love: 'When I care for my daughter I revisit my own vulnerability, my primordial helplessness. I witness that which I cannot personally remember, my early existence in this white state, this world of milk and shadows and nothingness.'[166] Motherhood is an event in which we re-encounter ourselves as infants to our own mothers and we perceive the maternal care which has sustained the continuing generations; the propulsion of cyclical time. Stone suggests that the past and present transpose themselves onto one another through the mother's visitation into her maternal past as 'memories of the past are directly retrieved in the present mother-child relation in its immediacy and corporeality'.[167] Through her present mother-child connection, Cusk realises that her survival means that she, too, was once cared for in the way she now cares for her daughter.[168] Through a desire to give her son an 'unconscious' memory 'of having once been gathered together, made to feel real', Nelson, too, is able to understand that 'this is what my mother did for me. I'd almost forgotten'.[169] For Riley, her son has returned to a pre-existence, interrupting the cycle of time; she witnesses 'how the living world gives into burning whiteness'.[170] Riley looks into the primordial nothingness referred to by Cusk: 'First came the intact negative full of blackened life in shaded patches, then abruptly this milkiness. This candid whiteness, where life stopped.'[171] The eternal time of the maternal past is imagined as a milky whiteness, a primordial fluid between being and non-being.

Through her mothering, Manguso finds herself reconnected to 'preverbal memories'; she remembers 'how it had felt to be wordless, completely of the physical world' and how before her 'body was an instrument for language it had been an instrument for memory'.[172] She begins to psychically inhabit the world of her infant and the world of her own past as an infant, as her temporal map reconfigures. Stone argues that, after motherhood, as the archaic past reappears, 'it

---

[164] Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p. 16.
[165] Young, p. 54.
[166] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 84.
[167] Stone, p. 136.
[168] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 84.
[169] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 176.
[170] Riley, p. 16.
[171] Riley, p. 16.
[172] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 66.

reappears as a being *other* to linear time', and therefore, as 'excessive to the mother's adult psyche, a psyche organized by her capacities for speaking and narrating'.[173] Manguso's narrative refers to a renewed mutism, a loss in desire to create language, and to engage in the reflective thought of her pre-maternal past. When she reconnects to the memories of her infant past, the memory returns as a sensory, somatic recollection: 'As I watched the baby play with his toys I remembered an orange plastic panel fixed to the rails of my own crib. [...] My brain had stored this memory – all the textures and colors and shapes and sounds.'[174]

The 'vertiginous' sensation of maternal temporality and feeling close to death, as well as birth, allows Manguso to enter an altered consciousness of herself in eternity. Like Riley, her re-awareness of mortality, echoing the vulnerability of her own infancy, and the colossal reach of time beyond that of the linear, is experienced as a positive transcendence, determining that

> The best thing about time passing is the privilege of running out of it, of watching the wave of mortality break over me and everyone I know. No more time, no more potential. The privilege of ruling things out. Finishing. Knowing I'm finished. And knowing time will go on without me.[175]

This alteration of Manguso's self-awareness is a revelation, a consciousness distant from the time-obsessed pre-maternal self. She concludes that 'all anxiety might derive from a fixation on moments – an inability to accept life as ongoing'.[176] The passage into eternal time, to cyclical and monumental time, has shifted Manguso's subjectivity. She is no longer a singular subject in control of a myopic temporal fate, but rather a temporal being existing against the vastness of all history; a history in which she may perceive herself as a vulnerable pre-verbal infant as well as a monolith within a borderless eternal time. Stone states that this 'reappearing past exceeds the present-day mother's grasp, seeming to reach her not from an early location in the uniform, measurable time of her narrating ego but from a time preceding linear time altogether – a time before time'.[177]

Hence, motherhood engenders a connection to a primordial temporality which is not based on a unified subjectivity but an unending collective consciousness. Manguso refers to this as 'participation in the great unity', as she states that she is ready 'to forget it all so that I'm clean for death'.[178] Her altered temporal perspective understands the individual's role in this monumental time to be as a transient light, that in a flash, 'I'm gone, but look, the churn of bodies through the

---

[173] Stone, p. 139.
[174] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 65.
[175] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 81.
[176] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 79.
[177] Stone, p. 139.
[178] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 86.

world of light unending'.[179] Nelson seems to be referring to Manguso's ongoing 'great unity' when she wonders 'is there really such a thing as nothing, as nothingness? I don't know. I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song'.[180] Through Manguso's primordial reconnection, she thinks of an ancient people whose identity lives on in thirty-thousand-year-old cave paintings; they may be long dead, but the record of their existence lives on. She can understand that: 'Lives stop, but life keeps going. Flesh begets flesh.'[181] Alongside, she recalls an epitaph within a great seventeenth-century cathedral which read: '*Reader, if you seek his monument, look around you.*'[182] The stonemasons 'set stones on stones not for the architect but for eternity', and Manguso is able to perceive herself and her role as a mother within a vast eternity of life. The temporal sequence she now sees herself connected to is not linear time but a generational ongoingness greater than the flow of everyday, lived time.

Moment of Vision

The shift in temporal being during one's experience of birth and motherhood leads us into Martin Heidegger's conceptualisations on time and states of being. Heidegger believes that we are fundamentally temporal beings, that our relation to the world and to ourselves is understood through our place within time. However, Heidegger holds a view on the structures of time which is particularly useful here: he disregards uniform, linear conceptions of time, which neatly divides the modes of past, present, and future, and instead believes that these modes – which he refers to as 'ecstases' – act upon us all at once, so that we experience ourselves living in a 'pure sequence of "nows"'.[183] Alongside his theory of temporality, Heidegger argues that for the most part individuals exist as a member of the 'They-self', in a state of 'falling' into 'average everydayness'.[184] Within his schema, the 'They-self' describes our familiar, everyday world, with its set of shared practices and social norms. If we are in a continued state of 'falling' then we are going along with the crowd of the 'They', a state that Heidegger views as a necessary mode of taking part in our social environment and culture. But he suggests that while we are in this position, our mode of being is not our own and that it is not 'authentic'. The aspect of Heidegger's concept of authenticity which is most useful for understanding the psychic developments within the discussed maternal texts is one of clarity, clear-sightedness, openness, and as a state in which we are removed from our 'fallenness'. Once we are removed from an inauthentic state of 'falling', then

[179] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 88.
[180] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 178.
[181] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 42.
[182] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 42.
[183] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 377.
[184] Heidegger, p. 220.

we are able to perceive the artifice of the 'They' from our position of elemental simplicity. If we understand the realm of the 'They' as taking place in modern chrononormativity, then the temporal shift portrayed by the writers suggests a progression from Heidegger's inauthenticity to an authentic mode of being.

Heidegger terms the transformation from an inauthentic to authentic state of existence a 'moment of vision'. The moment of vision is a 'resolute rapture', which represents an experience of authentic temporal consciousness. It takes place outside the structures of time, as a 'phenomenon which *in principle* can *not* be clarified in terms of the 'now''; the 'now' is a 'temporal phenomenon which belongs to time as within-time-ness'.[185] Conversely, Heidegger holds that the moment of vision cannot be described as happening within the past, present, or future structures of time but within a kind of anticipatory moment of ongoingness. The moment of vision represents a renewed connection to a primordial temporality as the subject perceives itself as a finite individual existing against the backdrop of all humanity.

In order for one to reach a moment of vision, Heidegger states that we must undergo a form of transformative event. He designates that one of these events is an unnamed episode which may provoke a recognition by the subject that they are a 'Being-towards-death'; a stark realisation that their existence is finite.[186] It is a vision of themselves as merely existing within the vast history of the world, that they were born on a certain date and that their death is also a certainty, and that this finitude is beyond their control. Death is no longer an abstract, distant concept; in a renewed state of 'Being-towards-death' they separate themselves from the inauthentic 'They-self', who pass death off as something that will one day occur but is not yet 'present-at-hand', and reconsider their lives from the standpoint of finitude.

Working through Heidegger's moment of vision concept, it is my contention that the maternal encounter with the connected experiences of birth and death portrayed within the texts demonstrates a moment of vision. The experience of pregnancy, labour, and birth is marked by its proximity to notions of mortality and I will demonstrate the ways in which the maternal relation to the child follows and diverges from Heidegger's concept of the temporal subject. Riley lives 'within the time of the dead themselves', through the proximate death of her son she may apprehend death with a profound intimacy. She no longer perceives death to be a distant event, realising what 'a finely vigorous thing a life is, all its delicate complexity abruptly vanished'.[187] Through this realisation, she senses a separation has occurred between herself and those not living within the time of the dead. The people she sees are 'as brittle as any dry autumn leaf', each 'a candidate for sudden death, and so helplessly vulnerable. If they do grasp that at any second their

[185] Heidegger, p. 387.
[186] Heidegger, p. 296.
[187] Riley, p. 17.

own lives might stop, they can't hold on to that expectation'.[188] Yet, her grasp on mortality is only half-realised, while she is 'half-doubting, assenting while demurring,' to the fact of her son's death, she is split between the temporality of the living and the dead. This is where Riley's sensation as a 'Being-towards-death' alters from Heidegger's, who states that the moment of vision is designated by its resoluteness and certainty; Riley is turned towards death in her narrative, but her state is uncertain and she clings to the idea that the death of her son was a mistake or for the possibility of a resurrection. Stuck in psychic limbo, she will not 'abandon' her surviving children with the hope of her 'own rapid death', any more than she would 'abandon the dead one. I've no intention of starting now, 'just because he's dead'.[189] Nonetheless, even in her partial state, she remains vigorously turned towards the closeness of death, though not directly her own. Riley maintains that you 'share in the death of your child, in that you approach it so closely that you sense that a part of you, too, died instantly. At the same time, you feel that the spirit of the child has leaped into you. So you are both partly dead, and yet more alive'.[190]

Heidegger believes that in the moment we comprehend our own mortality, we are completely alone: the subject 'essentially individualized down to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being, discloses of death as the possibility which is *non-relational.*'[191] In Heidegger's view, our glimpse of death is a solipsistic act, as we recognise ourselves passing into death as a singular body, leaving all others behind; this is the moment which separates us from the 'They'. For Heidegger, the state of 'Being-towards-death' is a profoundly isolating experience, as we perceive ourselves detached from the rest of human society. While our actual death is inevitably an individual act, Riley demonstrates that you may be a *relational* 'Being-towards-death' as the mother of a deceased child. Riley's text suggests that the moment of vision which occurs upon the realisation of the inescapability of death may apply to 'any life that could be said to unfurl itself inside your own life'.[192] Mention of others besides herself and her son are markedly absent from the narrative, but she retains an energetic relation to her dead son; together, they exist on a plain of temporal alterity. Riley depicts herself as separated from the functions of chrononormativity because of her sudden comprehension of the event of death through her maternal relation.

Riley's narrative portrays an authentic moment of vision generated by her intimate relation to death, a relation which is brought forth by the maternal encounter. Therefore, we may begin to understand the mothering experience as engendering a Heideggerian moment of vision created through the profound relation to the child. This moment of vision is evidenced through the maternal narrative of altered temporality, the sensation of existing beyond the construction of

---

[188] Riley, p. 18.
[189] Riley, p. 21.
[190] Riley, p. 14.
[191] Heidegger, p. 354
[192] Baraitser, 'Time and Again', p. 6.

everyday time, as well as the reconnection to a primordial, somatic state of being. Riley suggests that it is her renewed relation to death that is the cause of her break from chrononormativity: 'What do the dead give us? A grip on the present instant in which we're now relentlessly inserted. Not in a contemplative sense, but vigorously. A carnal sensation.'[193] The relentless insertion into a time which exists 'outside of earthly time' is directed implicated within the relation to the child, as Riley senses that it is as 'if a pregnancy had by now been wound backwards past the point of conception and away into its pre-existence'.[194] Riley is living in the time of pre-existence, which is a kind of eternal time; it lacks the normal markers for measuring the sequence of moving in time as the 'former slim and orderly temporal line has been blown away'.[195] The sensation of 'stepping outside of the entire sheltering sky of temporality itself', transports Riley 'into a not unpleasant state of tremendous simplicity, of easy candour and bright emptiness'.[196] Riley states that she has been radically extracted from the usual flow of time and the from the 'old world of consequences'.[197] It is only 'from your freshly removed perspective can you fully understand how our habitual intuitions of time can falter'.[198] Through her removal from sequential, linear time, she is able to perceive the fragility and fallacy of this constructed temporality. Riley suddenly comprehends the layers of temporal experience after she finds herself existing within a non-normative temporality.

The texts discussed provide a basis for the argument that the maternal encounter justifies being termed a moment of vision; it is its power to cause a changed perspective towards mortality, existence, and temporality. Manguso demonstrates an altered temporality which is provoked by an emerging relation to the developing infant; this constitutes a moment of vision produced by her renewed relation to death through her experience of pregnancy and birth. Like Riley, she perceives herself to be removed from the construction of chrononormativity, stating that 'I've never understood so clearly that linear time is a summary of actual time, of All Time, of the forever that has always been happening'.[199] Before becoming a mother, Manguso was a disciple of linear, sequential time, as evidenced by her dedicated recording of the passing of time in her diary. She had perceived her life to be made up by a sequence of moments; we might align this with Heidegger's 'sequence of 'nows'', which work to distract us from the reality of our temporal lives which, he argues, are an admixture of past, present, and future. Manguso had struggled to construct her temporal being through the recording of time: 'I'd write a few moments, but the surrounding time – there was so much of it! So much apparent *nothing* I ignored, that I treated as empty time between the memorable moments.'[200] During pregnancy and early motherhood, she cannot

---

[193] Riley, p. 23.
[194] Riley, p. 23.
[195] Riley, p. 26.
[196] Riley, p. 50.
[197] Riley, p. 35.
[198] Riley, p. 35.
[199] Riley, p. 74.
[200] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 4.

remember anything, and she is forced to abandon her previous temporal position. She develops an altered relationship to the nothing of her past, as she is no longer able to distinguish between the memorable moments and the nothingness. This is a temporal shift engendered firstly, by her reconnection to mortality and secondly, by the practice of maternal labour. Manguso states that nursing an infant 'creates so much lost, empty time. Of the baby's nighttime feeds I remember nothing. Of his daytime feeds I remember almost nothing'.[201] The distinction of passing time, of day and night, past and future, becomes muddied and insignificant. This lost, empty time was a 'different nothing from the unrecorded nothing of the years before; the new nothing was absent of subjective experience'.[202]

We may return to Kristeva's reference to eternal time as 'extrasubjective' in order to suggest that Manguso's experience of a new nothingness has lost the subjectivity of her past; one that was constructed by a futile grasp on an ordered temporal existence. Once she has recognised her diminutive role set against the vastness of human history, she may remove the singular subject from the monument of time. Her subjectivity becomes absorbed into a temporal existence beyond the minutiae of linear time: 'How ridiculous to believe myself powerful enough to stop time just by thinking.'[203] Through her motherhood, Manguso becomes more radically turned towards life as well as death and this marks a liberation from the temporal anxieties of her past. She is able to become aware of herself as part of a collective - the 'great unity' - as she dances her 'little dance for a moment against the background of eternity'.[204] Heidegger suggests that the moment of vision, of renewed awareness, may produce a feeling of angst or anxiety, but it also has the potential for feelings of emancipation: 'once one has grasped the finitude of one's existence, it snatches one back from the endless multiplicity of possibilities' and brings the subject 'into the simplicity of its *fate* (emphasis in original)'.[205] It is the endless multiplicity of possibilities that compel Manguso to maintain her diary; the removal of these possibilities releases her from a state of temporal anxiety. Heidegger's moment of vision suggests that rather than encouraging a morbidity, recognising the inevitability of your own demise encourages a new lucidity and appreciation for life. Manguso echoes this sentiment, stating that before 'I became a mother, I thought I was asking, *How, then, can I survive forgetting so much?* Then I came to understand that the forgotten moments are the price of continued participation in life, a force indifferent to time'.[206]

Beyond the extraordinary events of birth and death, the texts demonstrate the capacity for the everyday experience of motherhood to provoke a moment of vision for the mother. The daily and hourly interruptions which constitute the landscape of motherhood—the ruptures that punctuate the

---

[201] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 53.
[202] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, p. 53.
[203] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 82.
[204] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 81.
[205] Heidegger, p. 435.
[206] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 85.

flow of time—work as a kind of cumulative moment of vision, which constantly re-establishes the present mode of immediacy for the mother. The sensation of everyday maternal temporality dislocates the mother from the flow of time in a way similar to one's renewed perception as a 'Being towards death'. It has the potential to generate new understandings of ourselves as a being in the world. Baraitser presents the moment in which we are interrupted by the child as creating an opening which eludes scrutiny: 'the frustration caused by constant interruption is in part about having to face these elusive blanks […] I want to suggest that in this elusive moment, the moment in which we are interrupted by the other, something happens to unbalance us and open up a new set of possibilities.'[207] The nature of an interruption is that it causes a break within a form that was continuous; this rupture in flow becomes something new itself and also changes the shape of the original form. Baraitser explains that 'if the continuum is figured as the Same (that which is undifferentiated) then interruption is the appearance of difference that dislodges the Same from itself'.[208] Thus, the interruption which forms the daily fabric of motherhood has the potential to alter the temporal being of the mother, to produce a radical change in her perception of herself as a being in the world. The relentless interruption to the mother inserts her into an unending present; although it is a present tense with no duration or sense of change from what has been to what is to come. Rather, it mirrors Heidegger's moment of vision, which he presents as 'an authentic Present or waiting-towards,' suggesting that 'the moment of vision permits us *to encounter for the first time* what can be 'in a time' as ready-to-hand or present-to-hand'.[209] The task of the mother is to wait in anticipation, to bear the weight of the constant expectation of interruption. It is an 'extrasubjective' state of existence, a time of radical myopia. Through her daughter's cries, Cusk realises 'I have been there all along and this, I suddenly and certainly know, is motherhood; this mere sufficiency, this presence'.[210] The persistent cries of her baby work to obliterate all else: 'All that is required is for me to be there; an 'all' that is of course everything, because being there involves not being anywhere else, being ready to drop everything. [...] And accordingly, the whole peopled surface, the occupation of my life has been swept away by her cries.'[211] Baraitser maintains that the 'relentless and infinite present destroys all that is subtle, indeterminate, unknowing in one's thinking. It's not that mothers stop being able to think. It's that we think in a different order'.[212]

Manguso's diary-keeping illustrates the way in which the infinite present, provoked by maternal interruption, causes mothers to think in a different order: 'Reflection disappeared almost completely. Of a concert by a band I've liked for almost twenty years […] I wrote only *Still know*

---

[207] Baraitser, 'Time and Again' p. 69
[208] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 69.
[209] Heidegger, p. 388.
[210] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 70.
[211] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* pp. 70-71.
[212] Baraitser, p. 41

every word. Twenty years ago, the sentence would have been twenty sentences.'[213] In concurrence, Baraitser suggests that 'maternal subjectivity is a kind of subjective state in which it has become impossible to operate in the realm of reflective thought, and forces into awareness another form of subjective experience and thinking.'[214] Living in the unending present, Riley, too, discovers her capacity to reflect has become smaller, all subtleties are cut off: 'You entertain no reflections, either, that a life will leave its reverberations hanging in the air like a passage of music – nothing so sweetly melancholic. Instead your living in this instant, as the thinnest imaginable sliver of being, turns out to be hard edged.'[215] The mother of an infant must think in the immediate, as their realm of thought narrows. Of this time, Manguso recalls that 'I had no thoughts, no self-awareness'.[216] Like Riley, 'for eighteen months or so,' her thoughts are limited by the unrelenting relation to the infant: 'In the diary I recorded only facts. Minutes of nursing, ounces of milk, hours of sleep. Things were just themselves.'[217] Manguso conceives that this is how the world appears to an infant, who feel they exist in an infinite present without a solid grasp on a possible past or future. From their limited experience and immature development, the infant cannot conceive of a future beyond the next moment and the past is quickly forgotten, and thus, they bring the mother into this temporal consciousness.

The mother operates within an ongoing moment of anticipation and interruption which ruptures the ground of subjective thought. Baraitser is keen to emphasise the potential for original kinds of thinking alongside the obliteration of the existing thought passages of the mother's intellect. She recruits David Appelbaum's concept of the stop to theorise the generative potential of the mother's interrupted and suspended time. Appelbaum holds that when the stop, understood here as the interruption by the child,

> arrests the intellectualising tendencies of the mind, the concept of time is also affected. [...] When time comes to a stop, one experiences, not timelessness, but time unqualified by intellect. In the new order, the priori form of intuition (Kant) or internal time sense (Husserl) gives ways to an organic apprehension of the present moment.[218]

Baraitser focusses on the notion of 'organic apprehension', proposing that the intense sensory or somatic moments inherent within the maternal encounter generate a 'mode of experiencing which

---

[213] Manguso, p. 54
[214] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 63
[215] Riley, p. 47.
[216] Manguso, p. 55.
[217] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 67.
[218] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 79.

may have been unavailable previously, and may constitute a new mode of self-experiencing'.[219] The momentary split in temporal flow which interrupts the mother's mode of thought is figured by Baraitser as having the potential to produce a lasting change in the mother's consciousness. Like the moment of vision, the temporal rupture is understood as a 'momentary disappearance in which the subject comes back *fundamentally changed.* They are generative experiences, out of which newness can emerge'.[220]

[219] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 80.
[220] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 81.

Narrating Maternal Time

To return to Kristeva, she suggests that not only is linear, teleological time associated with male subjectivity and the realm of work, but by implication, it has also been the time of 'language considered as the enunciation of sentences (noun + verb; topic-comment; beginning-ending)'.[221] Therefore, we might conceive that the maternal subject is not only ostracised from chrononormativity, but from the articulation and narrative of our dominant cultural consciousness. Riley and Manguso are both explicit about the way in which their temporal alterity alienates them from forms of existing literature; that 'any published mention of this seemingly a-temporal life seems to be rare'.[222] They discover that conventional forms of narrative expression—the 'well-worn metaphors'—are no longer adequate vehicles through which to tell their stories.[223] A reliance on beginnings and endings, journeys, chapters, is no longer possible. Riley observes that the sequence of time and language has been interrupted as she quotes a 'rare' written account of this temporal rupture. Emily Dickinson is, in Riley's words, 'relentlessly to the point' through these lines: 'The thought behind I strove to join | Unto the thought before, | But sequence raveled out of sound | Like balls upon a floor'.[224] Riley uses these lines to illustrate her sense that sequential movement has become disordered and inconsequential: 'One note no longer implies another's coming. [...] noting small events and their effects doesn't revive your former impression of moving inside time.'[225] The linear narrative of the past has been decimated by the relentless present. Riley and Manguso can see only the 'middle' of time, the ongoingness; they do not see the endings or conceive of the beginnings that language demands. Both writers have a crisis of communication, prompted by their altered temporality: Manguso maintains that the 'essential problem of ongoingness is that one must contemplate time at that very time, that very subject of one's contemplation, disappears'.[226] Riley, too, considers there to be a connection between her altered temporality and the paralysation of her writer's hand, suggesting that 'once there's no longer any element of sequence because the sensation of flowing time has been halted, narration can't proceed'.[227] A life lived without predictable unfolding prohibits any 'attempt at descriptive writing' and thus, the idea of narration becomes 'structurally impossible'.[228]

The form of these maternal texts, or rather the seeming formlessness, becomes relevant. The structure and form of Riley's and Manguso's texts reflect their temporal position. They lack chapters entirely—the only hint of a traditional structure coming in the form of Riley's

[221] Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p. 17.
[222] Riley, p. 9.
[223] Riley, p. 36.
[224] Riley, p. 34.
[225] Riley, pp. 34-35.
[226] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 72.
[227] Riley, p. 56.
[228] Riley, pp. 56-57.

subheadings directly lifted from her diary. Although the addition of this structure to the text was only added after 'a familiar intuition of sequence eventually and spontaneously restored itself, having 'taken its time' over the passage of a few years, that I could begin to sort out my fragmented notes and start on these paragraphs'.[229] Hence, the creation of a sequential narrative during the lived condition of maternal temporality is blocked. Manguso's memoir contains sporadic memories and musings presented in a seemingly structureless form on each page. Both writers are aware that the experimental and loose structures of their texts reflect their temporal experiences and subsequent disillusionment with traditional writing practices. Riley states that if 'time had once ushered you into language, now you discover that narrative language had sustained you in time. Its 'thens' and 'nexts' had once unfolded themselves placidly. But now that time has abruptly gone away from you, your language of telling has left it'.[230] Riley's and Manguso's texts prioritize process rather than conclusion; their writing feels cyclical and organic, as if their readers could open them at any page.

If we return to Riley's assertion of Dickinson's verse as being 'relentlessly to the point', an approach which suits the sensation of the suspended present, we can extend it to analyse the style and form of these texts. The texts are sparsely narrated, with an approach that is at once subtle and succinct yet monumental in scale. In line with her experience of forgetting the moments and events of her life, Manguso asks: 'Does the mother of an infant need a smaller lexicon? Does she need a specifically limited lexicon?'[231] The pages of Manguso's text are laid out like a collection of poetry; each page contains fragmented prose, with some pages proffering only one sentence. The reader can feel interrupted themselves, as they are faced with so much blankness on the page; a reading experience which echoes the lived time of motherhood. The maternal subject is brought back to a primitive state of clarity, defined by Riley as a 'not unpleasant state of tremendous simplicity, of easy candour and bright emptiness'.[232] There is a sense that the maternal subject begins their narrative of altered temporality without an existing arsenal of language or a linguistic framework and so, this is reflected in the concise form of language. There is a lack, Riley submits, of existing literature 'that deals closely with this strange arresting of time'.[233] Riley senses that your 'very *will to tell* your violently novel state of timelessness is sapped, because you sense that your most determined efforts can't reach others; you feel syntax itself to be set against you here, because it must rely on conventional temporality to function at all'.[234] The writer arriving at the challenge

[229] Riley, pp. 57-58.
[230] Riley, p. 59.
[231] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 68.
[232] Riley, p. 50.
[233] Riley, p. 61.
[234] Riley, p. 59.

of narrating their altered maternal temporality must find original forms and syntax through which to tell their story, but by doing so, they may 'contribute specific ways of knowing the world'.[235]

Conclusion

Through this chapter, I have demonstrated the capacity for the maternal experience to untether the mother from normative temporal functioning and to transport her into an altered realm of temporal consciousness. I have sought to map the mother's temporal landscape through the overlapping sensations of interruption, ongoing present tense, as well as the problematising of the modes of past and future. The chapter has made passing mention of the effect of external factors on maternal temporality, but its focus has been on what Manguso terms 'pure states of being'.[236] This approach has been led by the content of the texts discussed in this chapter, which portray a sense of reconnection to primordial time as well as a focus on somatic and sensory experience. The chapter has finished with a brief discussion about the form of the texts as it relates to the themes explored by the writers; this is an analysis I will return to in the third chapter.

[235] Robertson, p. 2.
[236] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 91.

Chapter 2: Maternal Trauma and the Return Narrative

This chapter will explore the process of reparation with the mother; from the initial 'loss' of the mother in infancy and the reverberations of this loss in the development of the daughter, to the eventual reconnection with her in adulthood. It will examine the complications of the loss of the mother in Elisa Albert's *Afterbirth*, Sheila Heti's *Motherhood,* and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, in which the 'normal' internal loss of the mother during early development due to ambivalent anxieties is intensified by external influences that impacted the mother's ability to be present during the daughter's infancy and beyond. It will demonstrate that maternal legacies such as intergenerational trauma and a failure to mourn past losses block the potential for an affirmatory mother and daughter relationship for the women in these texts. That the grieving processes of 'normal' trauma over the loss of the mother in infancy and traumatic generational memory exhibit shared manifestations. The chapter will explore Marianne Hirsch's notion of the 'return narrative'; the ways in which the writers and protagonists of these texts find routes back to reparation with the mother and help bring the unsymbolised historic maternal trauma and loss into a resolution through the written text.

For Heti and Nelson, as well as Albert's central character Ari, the relationship with the mother is characterised primarily by ambivalence; there is an unresolved push and pull mechanism between mother and daughter present from infancy into adulthood. The mothers in these texts are rendered physically and emotionally distant, facing too many of their own historical anxieties and traumas to wholly exist in the present for their daughters. But despite fractious relationships, the psychic link between mother and daughter remains strong and shows in increasing clarity when the writers and protagonists contemplate their own motherhood. Through their own motherhood, they are forced to imagine themselves as their mothers as well as reimagining themselves as daughters to their mothers. The texts in this chapter demonstrate the daughter's desire to psychically return to the mother in order to resolve lifelong feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and melancholy towards the figure of the imagined and real mother as well as the imagined and real daughter (themselves). The texts become ways of journeying back to the mother, which involves a reconnection to an historic maternal line. In her memoir on motherhood, Adrienne Rich has stated that there undoubtedly exist the materials 'for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement' between the mother-daughter dyad, 'between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other'. [237]

Because of the narrative of conflict and ambivalence to the possibility for resolution between the mother and daughter in the texts, they point to a reading through psychoanalytic identity

[237] Rich, p. 226.

development theory, with a particular focus on the work of Melanie Klein. Therefore, the chapter will be theoretically underpinned by Klein's conceptions on the ongoing effects of early infant relations, as they are linked to feelings of anxiety, guilt, anger, and grief between parent and offspring. The work towards resolution between mother and daughter in the texts will be read through Klein's theory of reparation with the mother through a creative encounter. Klein's work on mother-daughter relations set a foundation for later feminist psychoanalytic interpretations, such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Marianne Hirsch, therefore, returning to her theories will provide a useful basis for this chapter. Secondary to Klein's work, the chapter will also draw upon theorists that have written on concepts within the topic of intergenerational trauma and postmemory. The chapter will draw from these works in order to argue that the maternal subject presents a distinct case of inherited trauma, and that this is linked to notions of the 'open wound' referred to by Klein. I will provide an argument that the distinct effects of intergenerational trauma, particularly that caused by the Holocaust, exacerbates the ambivalence, anxiety, guilt, and melancholy found to a certain extent in all mother-daughter relationships.

Early Object Relations with the Mother

A short summary of Klein's work on the interplay of internal and external forces between the mother and the infant during early development is necessary as a basis for further exploration in the chapter. From birth, the infant's relationship with its mother, its first love object, is characterised by ambivalence created by experiences of gratification and frustration. In the first months of life, the mother represents the infant's entire internal and external world; everything learned by the infant during this time is directly related to the interaction with the mother. In the most basic form, the infant perceives the mother to either be gratifying it with the present 'good' breast by feeding and holding it, or frustrating it by withdrawing the much-desired good breast; therefore, in this instance, the good breast becomes the bad breast associated with the suffering and discomfort brought about by its departure. Beyond frustration (bad) and gratification (good), the infant, completely reliant on the mother for nurturance at this stage, experiences the mother's actions toward her as a plot to either destroy or sustain her. The splitting of good and bad is the infant's mechanism for coping with her reliance on the perceived persecutory, absent mother. The infant cannot yet tolerate the coexistence of good and bad in the loved object, and by extension the external world, and so by 'splitting the two aspects and clinging to the good one he preserves his belief in a good object and his capacity to love it; and this is an essential condition for keeping him alive'.[238] In the infant's psychic phantasy, the two aspects must be kept separate and distinct for 'if

[238] Melanie Klein, 'Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy', *Human Relations*, 12.4 (1959), pp. 291–303, p. 296.

they are allowed to merge, clearly a good breast which is also cruel and vindictive has ceased to be good'.[239]

The separation of good and bad are set up in the infant's unconscious and if unresolved, transfers into her perception of the world and the people surrounding her, primarily the mother but later the father and siblings. Klein maintains that the antithetical thinking which views the bad breast as significantly dangerous and persecutory is inevitable 'even under the best possible conditions' of parenting, and, beyond inevitability, it is a fundamental part of development at this stage of infancy.[240] As the mother 'attacks' the baby by withdrawing the breast, the baby greedily projects 'destructive phantasies' of biting, tearing, emptying and annihilating the breast, and fears 'the breast will attack him in the same way'.[241] In Klein's estimations, this is when the infant begins to react to these stimuli with a complex process of introjection and projection which forms the 'core of the super-ego' and represents a prototype of all subsequent object relations.[242] In this process, the infant 'projects his love impulses and attributes them to the gratifying (good) breast, just as he projects his destructive impulses outwards and attributes them to the frustrating (bad) breast. Simultaneously, by introjection, a good breast and bad breast are established inside. Thus, the picture of the object, external and internalized, is distorted in the infant's mind by his phantasies, which are bound up with the projection of his impulses on to the object'.[243] This is surmised by Klein to form the basis of the Paranoid-Schizoid position; characterised firstly by the splitting of the good and bad parts of an object in the unconscious in order to cope with the existence of the persecutory, malevolent parts of the object, and secondly, by the anxiety related to possible retribution from the object for the destructive phantasies projected against it. The anxieties over persecution by the mother felt by the subject are always a result of the destructive phantasies that the infant feels toward the mother themselves. When the mother is absent, the infant believes it is caused by her sadistic impulses towards the mother and in turn this causes immense feelings of guilt and anxiety over bringing about the destruction of the loved object. The infant believes the ''breasts hate me and deprive me, because I hate them [...] You don't come and help, and you hate me, because I am angry and devour you; yet I *must* hate you and devour you to make you help' [...] and thus a viscous circle is set up'.[244] The infant feels guilt over her destructive phantasies and a paranoid anxiety that the mother will respond in kind; alongside the experience of nurturance and harmonic symbiosis with the mother which provides the precursor for all positive future external relationships with others *and* with the self, the guilt and anxiety associated with the infant's

---

[239] Riviere, Joan, *The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers 1929-1958*, ed. by Athol Hughes (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 284.
[240] Klein, 'Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy', p. 292.
[241] Melanie Klein, 'Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant', in *Developments in Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Susan Isaacs (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 189-236, p. 201.
[242] Klein, 'Some Theoretical Conclusions', p. 200.
[243] Klein, 'Some Theoretical Conclusions', p. 200.
[244] Riviere, p. 283.

destructive phantasies form a deep root of expectations of the outside world for the infant. The indistinction between the external object (breast) and the self (infant) through the process of identification and sublimation of the external object during development sets up the states of good and bad in the infant ego; they are then projected, first to the mother as the primary love object and then to all externality. Hence, the initial relation to the mother during this period has a great influence on later perceptions of the self and others. According to Klein, the process in which the 'object becomes to a certain extent a representative of the ego' form 'the basis for identification by projection or 'projective identification''.[245]

In favourable circumstances, then 'the mother is taken into the child's inner world as a good and dependable object, [and] an element of strength is added to the ego'.[246] If early interaction with the mother is predominantly persecutory or bad, then a poor identification develops between mother and infant which in turn impoverishes the infant's inner world and ego. Through this chapter, I will explore the external factors which make circumstances during crucial stages of infant development *less* than favourable in the case of the mothers and daughters depicted in the texts. I will argue that several historical external forces permeated the unconscious of the mothers in these texts in the shape of trauma and loss which then interfered with the crucial stages of development discussed here, in the case of the mothers *and* subsequently their daughters. Klein states, that without complications, as the infant's ego matures, they should develop a tolerance for the conflict and ambivalence felt during initial stages of connection with the mother. It is through the acceptance process of a co-existence of good and bad parts of loved objects and oneself that the infant matures. Klein suggests that it is not uncommon for infants to be unable to progress fully past this phase before reaching adulthood, and it is my contention that the central characters and authors of the aforementioned texts use the creation of the narratives as a way of processing the anxieties associated with the introjection of the ambivalent mother figure.

Without reparation with the internal and external mother figure the unprocessed grief associated with the angry driving away of the mother in infancy distorts into melancholia. As the infant 'takes her mother as her first object of love and also as her privileged identificatory point for her "ego"' and causes the 'loss' of her mother through persecutory fears 'she would have no recourse other than melancholia'.[247] The 'loss' of the mother whilst she still remains the ego's primary point of identification leaves the daughter with a 'hole' or an 'open wound' akin to Freud's understanding of melancholia. It is this open wound to which Klein refers when she draws her conclusions about reparation with the mother as the final process to resolve the daughter's melancholia.

---

[245] Klein, 'Some Theoretical Conclusions', p. 207.
[246] Klein, 'Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy', p. 294.
[247] Irigaray, Luce, 'A Very Black Sexuality?', in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 66-73, p. 66.

For her theory of reparation, Klein put forth the example of a painter named Ruth Kjar, written about in an article by Karin Michaelis. In the article, suitably titled 'The Empty Space', Michaelis describes the subject's 'fits of depression,' explained by Kjar to be the result of '"an empty space in me, which I can never fill!"'.[248] One day Kjar finds that the empty space within her is reflected back at her by a blank space on the wall of her home where a painting once hung. Crazed by the profound sadness of this empty space, she resolves to fill it with her own artistic creation. With no previous experience in painting and no other materials at her disposal, she frantically fills the space with a sketch in black chalk, and at once feels exhausted and satisfied. Following this first sketch, she continues to paint a series of portraits and it is the subject of these portraits from which Klein draws her theory. Following the chalk sketch, Kjar first paints an old woman, with a look in her 'gentle, tired eyes' that seems to suggest that she is ready for death. In comparison, Michaelis notes that the latest painting is a triumphant representation of the subject's own mother, in which she is 'slim, imperious, challenging'; 'she has the effect of a magnificent woman of primitive times, who could any day engage in combat with the children of the desert with her naked hands. What a chin! What force there is in the haughty gaze! The blank space has been filled'.[249] I intend to argue that the texts in this chapter follow a route to reparation akin to Ruth Kjar's through the creation of their maternal narratives.

The Refuge of the Father

In infancy the daughter turns away from the mother in order to avoid annihilation or because she feels herself to be in danger of destroying the mother or having already caused her destruction. She cannot tolerate the intense feelings of hate and love associated with her mother and transfers her feelings of love onto the father figure. There is a dual disidentification at work here, the destructive anxiety that produces an internal split evidenced by Klein and an externally generated urge to separate from the mother as the culturally impoverished parent. In her assessment of the mother-daughter relationship, Alison Stone has interpreted the rejection of the mother held by traditional psychoanalytic concepts to be enhanced and exacerbated by 'the girl's discovery of the *cultural* devaluation of what is female compared to what is male [...] as she enters into culture and language'.[250] In the case of the daughters in the discussed texts, practically speaking there is a secondary drive at play which causes them to retreat towards the father: the physical and emotional absence of the mother necessitates a retreat into the realm of the father. However, despite

[248] Melanie Klein, 'Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse', in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 84-95, p. 90.
[249] Klein, 'Infantile Anxiety Situations', p. 93.
[250] Stone, p. 89.

transferring feelings of devotion to the father, the daughter's identificatory point of origin remains within the lost or absent mother and hence the refuge of the father cannot be fully taken.

For Nelson, in *The Argonauts* and elsewhere in her earlier memoir, *The Red Parts,* there is no person more idealised than the saintly deceased father, and by that token no person is more vilified than the unfaithful, bad mother. Through the eyes of her childhood self we are told how Nelson's mother left her father for the housepainter, an event that was followed shortly by her father's premature death. Nelson compares herself to the vengeful Hamlet who resents his mother for marrying again after the death of his father, remembering how 'I swore in my diary that my sister and I would stand forever with the ghost of our dead father, who now looked down upon us, betrayed and heartbroken, from heaven'.[251] Like Hamlet, Nelson's mother bears the brunt of the blame for the breakdown of the relationship and for daring to 'have a chance at joy' beyond the walls of the family home. Stone reads the ambivalent feelings from the daughter to the mother through the ancient Greek tragedy *Oresteia,* in which Electra hates her mother Clytemnestra for murdering her father Agamemnon. Clytemnestra had carried out Agamemnon's murder in revenge for him sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia. Together with her brother Orestes, Electra plots to commit matricide to avenge their murdered father. Yet it is her brother who actually physically undertakes the murder of his mother, while Electra remains in the background. As Stone points out, while Electra outwardly rejects her mother, she cannot physically banish the maternal body as Orestes can, symbolising 'that the girl cannot expel the maternal body from her own body, as she could if she were assuming a male identity'.[252] We may draw a parallel between Nelson's approach to her mother's actions as a child with the ambivalent connection between Electra and her mother Clytemnestra. While Nelson yearns to align herself with the paternal body as the ego-ideal, her identity is still rooted in the deemed imperfect maternal body. Even in death she 'recognizes' her father's body as 'a density of heat and energy and joy and sexuality and song'.[253] Yet by the same token she has little understanding or sympathy of her mother's desiring body when she sees it supplanted onto another man. In *The Red Parts,* Nelson further places her mother and father at antipodean points, judging her mother by a higher standard to her father. After their divorce, her mother is figured by Nelson as cold, vulnerable, and weak, while her father is remembered as vibrant and kind: 'Our life with him in this house was colourful, hedonistic, and brief. Rainbows of light streamed through the stained-glass rainbow that dangled from gold string in front of the window.'[254] The steady stream of women that her father romances are softly recalled as inconsequential and innocent, whereas Nelson's stepfather is figured as a distant, unfaithful partner to her manipulated mother.

---

[251] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 133.
[252] Stone, p. 95.
[253] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 132.
[254] Maggie Nelson, *The Red Parts* (London: Vintage, 2007)

For Nelson, her father represents pure, uncomplicated vitality, a strength and sureness of character that she wishes to see now in her son Iggy; in her mother's lack she sees her own. In *Of Woman Born,* Rich speaks of the intrusion of the paternal figure into the mother-daughter relationship as a conflict between the constraints of patriarchy and the unconscious development of the female child. For Rich, while her own mother's body continued to exist in corporeal phantasy for her, she 'had understood very early' that her father represented authority in both the home and the outside world. While as a child Nelson senses the grand physicality of her father's 'tan, red, steaming' body, Rich recalls the times she glimpsed her father's 'penis dangling behind a loosely tied bathrobe,' both are images of virility, of an imposing 'voice, presence, style, that seemed to pervade the household'.[255] Importantly, Rich cites the instance her father began teaching her to read as the drive to separate from her mother; when her mother's sensuous body gave way to 'the charisma of my father's assertive mind and temperament'.[256] In *The Red Parts,* Nelson recalls the way her father encouraged her childhood ambitions of becoming a writer, while her mother is a teacher of fiction, a genre Nelson dismisses: 'As far as I could tell, stories may enable us to live, but they also trap us, bring us spectacular pain.'[257] Clearly there is a parallel between Nelson's opinions of her mother's work and her ambivalent feelings toward her mother more generally; the person who has enabled her to live but also endangers and oppresses. For Nelson, her father is worshipped as a corporeal ideal, never to be fully reached, idolized as 'the vessel of all earthly joy', whereas her mother is the container for all of Nelson's basic anxieties and regressions. Nelson is relieved when her stepfather 'finally' leaves, sensing that the 'intruder had finally been expelled. The sodomitical mother would melt away, and the maternal body would be ours, at last'.[258]

For Heti, it is not so much that she rejected the mother but that she believed her mother to have rejected her. She describes her father as the present parent who cared for her and her brother while their mother left the home to focus on her career. In Heti's eyes, her mother wished to destroy her happiness while her father maintained it. In her childhood reminiscence she pointedly refers to 'my father and I', never separate, while her mother is pictured singularly as existing outside the family unit. Heti recalls the ways in which her mother tried to get physical distance between the two of them: for several months during Heti's childhood her mother moved into a separate apartment in order to continue her studies. During a recollection of a home video, Heti

---

[255] Rich, p. 219.
[256] Rich, p. 219.
[257] Nelson, *The Red Parts*, p. 155.
[258] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 134.
Nelson's 'sodomitical mother' refers to a term first used Susan Fraiman in a chapter entitled 'In Search of the Mother's Anus' in *Cool Men and the Second Sex*, in which Fraiman reinterprets Freud's Wolf Man case. It is a term Nelson refers to in greater length from pages 84 to 87 of *The Argonauts*: 'Fraiman aims to return the mother's pleasure to the scene, and to foreground her access – "*even as a mother"* – to "non-normative, procreative sexuality, to sexuality in excess of the dutifully instrumental." The woman with such access and excess is the sodomitical mother.'

recoils as she watches her mother 'wanting to get inside and away from us [...] a look of disgust on her face as she watches me'.[259] Through the eyes of Heti as an infant, we are led to believe that, while her father lavished her with love, she had a mother whose gaze was invariably turned away or was disappointed by what she saw in her daughter. However, in a moment of closeness with her mother she remembers 'being a little girl and my mother showing me slides through her heavy, metal microscope [...] She would sit at the dining-room table with her slides spread out around her, then she'd stand me on the chair and lead my eyes in close to the eyepiece to see'.[260] There is a tenderness in this moment of intergenerational visual connection; as her mother plucks out one of Heti's hairs and puts it under the microscope, showing her daughter '*this is your hair,'* she wonders: 'Could this hollow reed be the truth of my hair? My mother could see to the smallest parts of everything. There was power in how my mother could see'.[261] Her mother represents a dangerous power for Heti, a figure with whom she seeks to regain the intimacy of her infancy and whom she fears. Contemplating her potential motherhood, Heti recalls a feeling that she was '*existentially'* primarily a daughter to her mother, 'and I always would be'.[262] As her mother did with her grandmother, Heti has lived her life faced towards her mother; a continuous touchpoint for her identity formation. Rather than to a potential child, Heti's text is written for her mother; the motherhood of the title refers to an historic site of intergenerational maternal trauma that Heti seeks to resolve. The text writes backwards in time in order to repair issues in the present: 'I named this wrestling place Motherhood, for here is where I saw God face-to-face, and yet my life was spared.'[263] The work of all three writers are partially a process of recompense towards the mother and by extension the self.

Intergenerational Trauma

> It may be that you're porous and the grief isn't yours. Does your mother have a grief?
> *Yes.*
> Well, it might be that you were born with your mother's grief, like it got implanted in you as an energy ball. I feel a really strong energy from you, and it's like, whatever that energy is, you're a baby growing inside your mother's body, and your mother has this ball of grief or sorrow or negativity, and then it goes into your body, and you're born, and you're walking around with your mother's grief and sorrow, and you don't even know it! But it's gnawing at you.[264]

---

[259] Sheila Heti, *Motherhood* (London: Harvill Secker, 2018), p. 80.
[260] Heti, p. 179.
[261] Heti, p. 179.
[262] Heti, p. 162.
[263] Heti, p. 284.
[264] Heti, p. 144.

Heti's sense that she is inhabited, psychologically and physically, by the viscous substance of her mother's sadness and grief pervades the text. Eva Hoffman has written of the trauma transmitted between survivors of trauma and their children, particularly through the 'most private and potent language – the language of the body'.[265] The notion of intergenerational trauma, the proposition that past traumatic experiences do not disappear but are rather passed down between the generations in various guises, takes on a new significance when considered in the space of the maternal. The mothers in their privileged position as the physical bearers of the next generation are most likely to be implicated in the inheritance of familial trauma; the women in these texts are literally reproducing the unconscious traumatic memories of the past through their bearing of children. The inherited memories are imagined as a physical presence within them – a malignant entity infecting the unconscious. The exact narratives of trauma are forgotten or repressed yet the grief bleeds from one generation to the next. If the origin of the meaning of trauma is wound, then these narratives expose the open wound that exists in the grandmother, mother and daughter, and the visceral current which flows between them. Nicole Krauss observes in her memoir that the desire for a lost identity is '"something that's inherited in the blood, a sense of loss and longing for it"'.[266] The intergenerational transmission of trauma between mother and daughter is always embodied here, it exists in the women's bodies as both alien and familiar. On the subject of her parent's trauma, Hoffman, again, feels the 'deep, embodied anguish' of their stifled trauma 'in my body as if it were mine'.[267] The women are retroactively giving birth to their mothers, as their mothers have before them. Through the narratives, they labour in order to heal a shared injury; like in the story of Jacob to which she refers, and like her mother before her, Heti has been touched on the hip by the demon with whom she wrestles. The wrenched hip, a persisting impediment to normal life, is an injury she shares with her mother.

Hirsch argues that the intergenerational site of transferred memory begins in the familial space with the 'language of family, the language of the body', with 'nonverbal and precognitive acts of transfer'.[268] The cultural memory of trauma is translated into an embodied, individual memory passed along an umbilical cord between the female postgeneration all the way back to the original trauma. For Heti and Albert and post-Holocaust descendants like them, they have become the embodiment of Jewish survival. The collective memory of the Holocaust is imprinted on the children, their existence represents their forbearers fight to ensure the survival of their family. Melvin Jules Bukiet recalls that his parents '"gazed at their offspring as miracles in the flesh," as a

---

[265] Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 9.
[266] Victoria Aarons, and Alan L. Berger, *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2017), p. 9.
[267] Hoffman, p. 14.
[268] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 34.

‘“retroactive victory over tyranny and genocide”’.[269] Ari comes from a family of vocal Survivors: her father and his partner are involved in the conservative Jewish community and run an organisation that promotes Jewish books. It is implied that Ari’s aunt has severed contact with her because of her decision to start a family with a man of non-Jewish descent; hence, Ari becomes the bearer of Jewish history and heritage. It is a burden placed on the children of survivors, especially the daughters, who are responsible for producing the next generation of survivors.

Heti grapples with the legacy of the women in her family who have felt this pressure; as a daughter she reads her history through her female forbearers. Her paternal grandmother ‘drew closed the white curtains’ on Friday nights so the neighbours would not see her light the Sabbath candles, a reminder of how she had spent the war in hiding while her parents and brother died in concentration camps; the ‘*Germans took their lives and the Communists took their property* [...] *There was nothing left. Well* [...] we *were left*’.[270] There is not only a responsibility to ensure the future of the family and the culture, but for survivors to propel their children towards the freedom and opportunities not known to the parents. There is a contradiction between the need to keep the children of survivors safe and to allow them freedom and to push them into professional and financial achievement. The writer Jacqueline Rose remembers the expectation placed at her mother’s door to ‘nullify’ the atrocities that had shaped her family for the sake of building a safe environment in which to raise her children. For the sake of this she was asked to forgo a promising medical career. Rose recalls that her mother would say that she would like to ‘wrap her daughters in cotton wool’ and glue them to the wall of her bedroom; ‘The fact that atrocity lurked beneath the veneer and in the attic, that memory could not so easily be subdued, was something not to be spoken (although the cotton wool image is the giveaway, as if she wanted to muffle the sounds).’[271]

Too poor to pay for a doctor, Heti’s maternal grandmother, Magda, witnesses both of her parents die of influenza ‘without being seen’.[272] Later, in the concentration camp, she tries to help a sick woman who later dies, and as way of recompense, she marries this woman’s son, a man ill-suited to her ambitions and intellect. After the war, she hires an elderly woman to clean their home, whom she wants to help financially, but does not allow to clean more than two dirty plates. Magda’s plans of becoming a lawyer, a way of raising her family out of the poverty she had known as a child, are sabotaged by her husband’s illegal business dealings and she remains ‘unhappy with her fate’.[273] Magda pours her own hopes of becoming a professional into her daughter, Heti’s mother. Magda and her husband attend to the family business while Heti’s mother spends her time in the ‘dark, empty home,’ in which, she recalls: ‘*No one even opened the blinds*’.[274] Like Heti’s

---

[269] Aarons, Berger, p. 31.
[270] Heti, p. 69
[271] Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), pp. 191-192.
[272] Heti, p. 69.
[273] Heti, p. 71.
[274] Heti, p. 72.

paternal grandmother, she is hidden behind the curtains; there is a clear comparison to wartime imprisonment here, continued into the next generation. Heti's mother works to fulfil her own mothers' wishes and ambitions; she throws herself into studying, goes to medical school and later becomes a pathologist. Hiding behind the microscope, avoiding the living patients who remind her unbearably of her own dead mother, she dissects the bodies of the deceased to search for answers. Magda died of cancer shortly after Heti's mother left Hungary for the US with the prospect of a new family and life. Along with the grief, Heti's mother 'felt so guilty, as though by abandoning her mother, she was the murderer. Around this time, her nightmares about her mother began'.[275] Since the offset of Heti's childhood, her mother was devoted to diagnosing whether or not the cells in people's bodies were malignant or benign; this is just one of the ways she works backward towards reparation with her lost mother. As if to illustrate this point, Heti has included a photograph she has of her faceless mother poised over a corpse, a scalpel in her hand, performing an autopsy; she is about to uncover a wound, to find something that lies hidden within the faceless body. Hoffman refers to intergenerational trauma as comparable to wounds: 'in the aftermath of the Shoah, the traces left on survivors' psyches were not so much thoughts or images as scars and wounds. The legacy they passed on was not a processed, mastered past, but the splintered signs of acute suffering, of grief and loss'.[276] Heti places a knife in her bedroom, as she considers the story of Jacob wrestling with the demon, which we are to understand as a story which refers to her struggle with her maternal past. Holding the knife, Heti wonders what she has found in the 'autopsy of a body laid upon the page'.[277] If the women in Heti's family inherit a mortal wound through traumatic postmemory, then each generation has attempted to diagnose and remove it from themselves. The urge to discover a resolution to this burden becomes increasingly imperative and less explicable as it passes between each subsequent generation: 'wrestling with shadows can be more frightening, or more confusing, than struggling with solid realities'.[278] Through the generations of Heti's family it also becomes increasingly clear that bringing a new child into the world is not sufficient to expel the memory of familial trauma, in fact, the trauma distorts and becomes unsymbolised but no less potent for the third generation.

By Ari's judgement, the pregnancy of the women and the birth of a child in her family is linked to the destruction of the mother. The corruption is present within the cells and viscera of the maternal body as well as the psyche. Like Heti's maternal intergenerational trauma, it is passed through cancerous 'disasters'; a curse that began with the grandmother. The trauma which causes the destruction of the maternal body is both internal and external: the mothers are destroyed by the postmemory of historic injury as well as the retroactive violence done by the child. In this way Ari

[275] Heti, p. 73.
[276] Hoffman, p. 34.
[277] Heti, p. 274.
[278] Hoffman, p. 66.

is aware that her existence is implicated in her mother's death, yet it is also a force beyond her power. Referring to her grandmother's multiple miscarriages, Ari suspects that maybe 'it was genetic, maybe it was war trauma, maybe it was psychic, maybe the Good Lord in His Infinite Wisdom simply did not want her bearing children, not after what she had been through, what she had survived'.[279] After suffering many miscarriages her grandmother was able to successfully bring her child to term through the help of an experimental 'miracle drug' which subsequently was discovered to deform female reproductive organs and to potentially cause cancer in their offspring. The physical manifestation of the historic trauma is a wound, a deformity, a fundamental fault in the body of the women, which predisposes them to abnormal reproduction and later an inability to mother sufficiently. Ari's grandmother's mental illness, caused by the recurrent memory of historic trauma and the loss of her young siblings in the concentration camp, results in her suicide when her daughter, Ari's mother, is eighteen. Through Ari's eyes, the implication here is that her capacity to mother is obstructed through a legacy of insufficient mothering within her family, which has its root in the original trauma experienced by her grandmother in the concentration camp. Ari suspects that she is part of a generation that was not meant to survive, that there is akin to a female 'curse' at play within the women. In this way, the oppressors and perpetrators of the trauma continue to enact violence and deprive the 'survivors' of their family security.

Hirsch suggests that the following generation of survivors want to 'assert their own victimhood' by identifying with the past trauma of their parents and grandparents that has unconsciously affected their psyche; this is the foundation for the return narrative.[280] Through the text, Ari excavates the traumatic memories of her grandmother in Auschwitz as well as the birth trauma she experienced years later. Because of the silence of her mother, Ari invents a narrative that links the women in the family as she attempts to heal past and current traumas. As is common with other families who have survived trauma, there is a prohibition on speaking about it and an unconscious disavowal of its existence. In Hoffman's experience, there was a lack of coherent oral record of her parent's trauma, because to 'make a sequential narrative of what happened would be to make indecently rational what had been obscenely irrational'.[281] Ari never met her grandmother, who died before she was born, and had an uncommunicative, distant relationship with her own mother. She finds her grandmother's letters hidden at the bottom of her mother's closet, buried and withheld from the family narrative because of the shame and guilt associated with the circumstances of her grandmother's survival and the later prospering of the family. In these letters Ari searches for answers and clues to her past, a way of joining the pieces of her family's broken past. As Thane Rosenbaum suggests, 'the third generation must navigate with an inexact, approximate map, a broken narrative. Theirs is a "recreated past," a matter of "filling in gaps, of

---

[279] Albert, p. 44.
[280] Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory,* p. 34.
[281] Hoffman, p. 15.

putting scraps together"'.[282] From the fragments of information found in her grandmother's letters, Ari crafts a narrative in which she psychically travels back through time in order to relive her grandmother's experiences; Hirsch calls these affective journeys 'return narratives'.[283] Through her return narrative, Ari starts to understand that the beginning of her grandmother's Auschwitz trauma laid the foundation for her own flawed identity formation, the root of her feelings of guilt, anger, inadequacy, as well as enduring melancholia. Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger suggest that there is a recurring pattern within post-trauma literature of this type in which the characters affectively imagine themselves in others and others in themselves. Aarons and Berger describe the type of traumatic displacement displayed in characters like Ari to be 'a kind of psychic breakdown of the distinction of self and other, a cathection of the third generation's obsession with knowledge onto the absent grandparent or unknown family members'.[284] The identification with the lost or murdered family member becomes a way of preventing and controlling the character's fear of the unknown and unknowable; 'a fear of what was possible'.[285] Through their affective revisiting of the past, the third generation has the unconscious aim of transforming fractured stories into an experience as tangible as their own; they are in effect seeking to make the past present. Aarons and Berger refer to this 'anguished empathetic projection' in a memoir written by Andrea Simon, in which she traces the experience of her lost grandmother and ends up visiting the village of her grandmother's childhood. In this moment, Simon 'psychically assumes her grandmother's wound, so much so that she conjures her grandmother into being and identifies with her, displacing her own anxiety and fear onto her grandmother and, chiastically, attempting to take on her grandmother's certain fear'.[286] Through this return narrative, 'the memoirist is not only a time traveller' but shares the psychical space with her grandmother, as she is reincarnated in the text.[287] Like Simon, Ari identifies with the wound inflicted on the body of her grandmother by bringing the letters she found into the present narrative.

Ari positions her own caesarean section alongside her grandmother's experience of childbirth 'midcentury American style', which is described by Albert as a traumatically intrusive act perpetrated by a man against a vulnerable woman.[288] The passages relating to Ari's childbirth - which are recounted only a small number of paragraphs before the grandmother's, clearly suggesting a parallel in Ari's biography – uses similar imagery and style to the story of the grandmother's caesarean. In addition, the grandmother's childbirth narrative is heavily influenced by the language of conflict and torture, as are Ari's descriptions of her own childbirth and early

[282] Aarons, Berger, p. 4.
[283] Aarons, Berger, p. 13.
[284] Aarons, Berger, p. 24.
[285] Aarons, Berger, p. 25.
[286] Aarons, Berger, p. 25.
[287] Aarons, Berger, p. 25.
[288] Albert, p. 159.

motherhood. The pregnancy, miscarriages and traumatic childbirth of the grandmother are an echo of the persecution and violence she received at the hands of the Nazis. The miscarriages are conflated with the nightmares that begin after her arrival in America, nightmares which represent her unprocessed trauma and guilt of Auschwitz, simmering underneath the veil of the family's newfound prosperity. The grandmother 'wakes from nightmares in which the incinerated siblings shriek for help from a black sinkhole [...] an SS officer lines her up with her primary school mates and massacres them all with a hailstorm of bullets coming from his very tiny dick'.[289] The 'killing' of the fetuses by her body is directly implicated in the enduring shadow of the concentration camp and the spectres of her dead siblings. Her unprocessed mourning of her siblings results in a jeopardization of her pregnancies; even when a potential 'replacement' child is presented the guilt of the murdered siblings prevents her from moving on. The siblings are physically absent, but they exist in her dreams, doomed to torture her so that she cannot mourn their loss and thus enters into a profound melancholia culminating in her suicide. The haunting of her psyche, reimagined in her nightmares, manifests in a kind of poisoning of her body.

By elucidating the story of her mother's birth from her grandmother's letters Ari relates her own birth trauma to that of her grandmother's and in doing so, she identifies herself as a victim of a polluted legacy. Ari's experiences of childbirth and motherhood are described in terms of war, rape, torture, and annihilation. The obstetricians are imagined in the same role as the SS officers, as sadists and rapists who revel in their brutality. Her grandmother 'survived' by being '[r]aped under the smoke'; 'All the things they wanted to do to her [...] She survived by fully accepting it.'[290] Alongside the descriptions of her grandmother's rape in the concentration camps Ari recalls a 'time I fucked two guys', that there was a 'great freedom in being an object. Letting them use me, my body a thing to be used'.[291] Later, the grandmother's childbirth is described in the same language as the war rape, the physical suppression of her body during labour mirroring the Nazi soldiers' desire for sexual domination: 'the nurses have her strapped down, drugged and thrashing, crying out [...] The doctor arrives, selects his cutting instrument, and separates her [...] the doctor wields another shiny instrument, big impressive one [...] this is his favourite part, oh yes, in past the nice, clean incision, clamp that soft head and give it a good tug'.[292] The doctor/rapist violates her, as the 'masked nurses' silence her and depersonalise her as the Nazi regime did to both her and the Jewish population. An analogy for her stifled trauma, as well as an echo of the likely fate of her lost siblings in the concentration camp, eighteen years after the birth of her daughter, she 'sticks her head in the oven [...] A Survivor no more'.[293] The grandmother's inability to forget the trauma

[289] Albert, p. 158.
[290] Albert, p. 140.
[291] Albert, pp. 140-141.
[292] Albert, pp. 159-160.
[293] Albert, p. 161.

that she experienced in Auschwitz results in her admission to a mental hospital, where she receives electroshock therapy in an attempt to 'restart her brain'.[294] Yet she continues to relive her memories of the camp, the murder of her siblings and her repetitious sexual assault at the hands of the Nazis: 'Why hadn't she worked harder, my grandmother obsesses[, to] find and save even *one* of her siblings? Their names she can't even bear to recall. And why can't she stop this obsessing? It's over. It's past. They're in America now. The war is behind them. Another life.'[295] In its prohibited form, the memory of the war physically and psychically lingers within her, and manifests in her 'mental insanity', nightmares and multiple miscarriages. The suppression and denial of the trauma of the war, the forced prostitution and the violent birth of Ari's mother are driven into the grandmother's unconscious to be passed on in an unresolved and unsymbolized form to the female descendants of the family. The letters written by the grandmother, their survival a stubborn resistance to relegate her experiences entirely to the past, are inherited by Ari's mother and hidden in a jewellery box. The memories written in the letters continue to be concealed, destined to become the silent legacy of the subsequent mothers and daughters. The difficult memories of pain, guilt and shame are deemed incompatible with the survivor's desire for the prosperity of the family in the new country and are therefore denied and disavowed.

As part of her return narrative, Ari interprets motherhood through the language of conflict: she speaks of a new mother as 'shell-shocked [...] like she's been ripped apart'; her and Mina are '*like war buddies*'.[296] Ari's account of childbirth is written in the same language as her grandmother's:

> They cut me in half, pulled the baby from my numb, gaping, cauterized center. Merciless hospital lights, curtain in front of my face. Effective disembodiment. Smell of burning flesh. Sewn back up again by a team of people I didn't know, none of whom bothered to look me in the eye [...] Severed from hip to hip, iced, brutalized, catheterized, tethered to a bed.[297]

Again, the surgical knife becomes the instrument of rape and the act of the caesarean section becomes a tactic of suppression by a powerful invading force. Ari and her grandmother are connected by a common wound; by affectively imagining a shared experience of birth trauma and transforming it from the indefinite narrative of the grandmother's letters into a tangible story, Ari creates a link to her unknown grandmother in which she is able to become a participant in the generational trauma.

---

[294] Albert, p. 158.
[295] Albert, p. 158.
[296] Albert, p. 71, p. 182.
[297] Albert, p. 16.

The baby in her grandmother's womb becomes a personification of the people who did not survive the annihilation; it is transformed into a hideous child who becomes the primary oppressor and destructor. The birth of the baby girl, with no knowledge or experience of the trauma experienced by her parents, does not deliver the grandmother from her grief and erase the trauma of the past. The child, Ari's mother, is hated and feared by the grandmother from the outset; the baby is an 'insistent incredible terrifying monstrous thing' who 'wants out' in order to remind her of the monstrous things that happened in the camp.[298] The child becomes a manifestation of her past torture, which lies unresolved within her: the 'thing' is removed from her and is swiftly taken away, but an 'echo of its yelping remains. She has heard that sound before because she has *made* that sound, a long time ago, or not so long ago'.[299] It becomes the siblings that the grandmother could not save as well as her own lost childhood; hence, the child is born from a wound which is not her own into resentment and grief.

Along with the projection of unsymbolised trauma onto the child, the mother reacts to being brutalized by childbirth by coming to associate motherhood with an attack on the self and an oppressive female disembodiment; a connection Ari's imagines to be cross-generational. It is a 'curse' which dooms the children – the embodiment and cause of the violence - to reactionary persecution by the mother. The 'cancerous disasters' that plague the women in the family, the unfortunate tribe of 'DES daughters' whose mothers were once given the synthetic oestrogen Diethylstilbestrol, are a constant reminder of a fault in their maternal legacy; the 'deformed reproductive organs' tie motherhood with the failure and death of the body. Ari bitterly recalls that her mother's 'cancer made itself known six months after – surprise – I was born'.[300] In the psyche of the child, the mother being diagnosed with cancer and later dying as a result is an implicit reaction to her birth. To accentuate this, during her developmental years Ari is constantly aware of her mother's prolonged state of illness and proximate relationship to death. Though as a child Ari 'wasn't really in the loop' regarding her mother's declining health, she recalls that the 'treacherous decay' of sickness and death 'mixed up with puberty' to hang like a spectre in the family.[301] For the grandmother, too, the birth of her child did not immediately induce illness but is certainly indicated as a major factor in her eventual suicide. If the child in this circumstance begins to sense that she may in some way be responsible for her mother's sickness, then what is likely to follow are feelings of guilt and anxiety over her predestined power to destroy the mother. This represents an actualisation of the internalised bad breast of infancy, as referred to by Klein, as Ari fears she has literally brought about her mother's demise.

---

[298] Albert, p. 160.
[299] Albert, p. 160.
[300] Albert, p. 45.
[301] Albert, p. 56.

Albert indicates that Ari's mother did little to allay these fears in her daughter and, in fact, through her erratic and sometimes abusive behaviour, may have encouraged or exacerbated the impression. Her mother is the '*Bitch from hell'* who made her 'only child call her Janice'; who used 'physical force and terror'; and who paid 'someone else to care for her child and treated that person horribly'.[302] Ari learns to fear Janice's 'darker moods', during which she would 'say terrible things to my father and me'; 'If she was angry, if she was sad, you were going to suffer.'[303] She finds minor solace in a succession of abused housekeepers hired by her mother, who were also the victim of Janice's rage: Ari was 'their little *pobrecita*', they kissed her on the forehead after they were ordered out of the house, saying '*Sweet girl, sweet girl, bye. I be praying for you*'.[304]

During her childhood, Ari remembers being tormented simply for her existence and while there were moments of better treatment during her mother's 'fine' moods, the relationship with her mother is impeded by a profound ambivalence rooted with her grandmother. Ari refers to her 'mother's mother', whom she never met, as the 'Tormenter of my tormenter'.[305] Ari's mother, who persecuted her for what she represented, has inherited this temperament from her own mother and is therefore more likely to reproduce the mothering that she experienced as a child. The mother and the child take on the mirrored roles of tormenter and tormented that is characteristic of the conflicts in early infancy, but which, in the case of Ari and her mother, has persisted into her adulthood: the mother continues to regard the child as a threat to her stability and returns the attack she perceives the child to be doing to her. Ari believes that this damaging mother-child relationship was established in the previous generation and reproduced between her and her mother; by this understanding, Ari now struggles to move on from the role of the tormented and tormenting mother herself. Frustration and persecution by the mother were the dominant aspects of Ari's infancy and, thus, as a child she struggled to amalgamate the oppositional factors. The schizoid splitting of the experiences of good and bad were likely accentuated by her mother's erratic moods during which Ari was the target of rage or the occasional subject of maternal affection. Because of her mother's early death, it is an asymmetry which has never been resolved. The dominance of persecutory maternal behaviour produced a desire within Ari to imitate and project the persecution she received from the maternal object onto the mother. The fact that this process was interrupted by her mother's premature death suggests that this impulse and the figure of persecutory mother were retracted into Ari's ego to continue their influence into adulthood. As stated by Klein, if grievance and hatred 'towards the first objects [the mother] predominate' because of an imbalance of good/bad experienced in relation to the object, 'they tend to endanger sublimations and the relation

[302] Albert, p. 48.
[303] Albert, p. 48.
[304] Albert, p. 49.
[305] Albert, p. 139.

to substitute objects'.[306] For Ari the grievance projected onto the lost mother is never resolved and hence the oppositional good and bad breasts are never amalgamated; she will continue to project this splitting onto her relationships with other women. If the mother is emotionally distant or physically lost during infancy and beyond, then the subject may continue to project the asymmetrical polarity of bad/good into substitute figures – in Ari's case, the female objects of her desire tend to eventually become objects of frustration when they inevitably fail to fulfil ideals of gratification.

Fear of Vulnerability

If the shape of the original trauma becomes unsymbolised and unresolved through the generations, in the third-generation it converts into a disconnected anxiety and melancholia with an unknown cause. Zelda G. Knight presents a case of a woman who inherited her mother's anxiety after she witnessed a violent home invasion in which the grandmother was beaten, the patient describes herself 'as always anxious', explaining that 'my whole life I have always had this inexplicable anxiety [...] I have always felt a dread and fear inside [...] I cannot explain it but it has always been there'.[307] Like Knight's subject, the women in these texts inherit the anxiety linked to the trauma but not the narrative of the disavowed trauma itself. Therefore, the anxiety does not seem to have a direct source in the women's real lives. Knight's subject described an 'alien living inside' 'creating anxiety', 'something she needed to eject or expel from herself'.[308]

Nelson has inherited a paranoid anxiety from her mother; she struggles to overcome this compulsion throughout the text. Hoffman refers to the transmission of the symptoms of trauma from parent to child 'as having drunk victimhood' as if from 'one's mother's milk'.[309] Nelson often returns to the toxicity of her mother's body, suggesting that she may have learned the scorn she feels for other people's needs from her mother; 'perhaps it laced my milk'.[310] At the beginning the anxiety is connected to a distinctly female vulnerability associated with violent fears of the outside world and then it transfers into fears related to pregnancy and motherhood. Like the origin of the word trauma, vulnerability also has its roots in the capacity to be wounded in the Latin *vulnus*. The fear of opening oneself up emotionally and physically to possible distress produces an anxiety, described by Nelson as 'prophylactic', which functions as a form of protection for the mother and daughter. If vulnerability is associated with exposure and unwanted intrusion from unknown

[306] Melanie Klein, 'Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant', in *Developments in Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Susan Isaacs (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 189-236, p. 225.
[307] Zelda G. Knight, ''If I leave home, who will take care of mum?' Intergenerational Transmission of Parental Trauma through Projective Identification', *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 40.2 (2017), pp. 119-128, p. 120.
[308] Knight, p. 121.
[309] Hoffman, p. 60.
[310] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 127.

attackers, then a reaction to this unpleasant state may take the form of anxiety regarded by the sufferer as a preventative and protective measure. Nelson's mother is hyper-aware of what she sees as the inherent dangers of life, that 'people don't really know what they're in for in this life – what the *risks* are. How could there be such a thing as an irrational peril, if anything unexpected or horrific that has ever happened could happen again?'.[311] Because of her exaggerated fears associated with individual vulnerability and the precarity of the people she cares for, Nelson's mother practices hyper-independence and autonomy. This is an urge that has influenced Nelson's mentality: she recalls a teacher who once told her that '*You're a great student because you don't have any baggage'.*[312] The impulse to avoid unnecessary dependence on friends and family and to treat 'other people's needs as repulsive' derives from a need to protect oneself and others from the anguish of heartbreak, loss and grief.[313] From her mother Nelson claims she inherited a compulsion to derive 'the bulk of my self-worth from a feeling of hypercompetence, an irrational but fervent belief in my near total self-reliance'.[314] The twin reactionary impulses of anxiety and hyper-independence act as an attempt to avoid vulnerability and, therefore, leaving oneself open to actual trauma, to tangible wounding. At some point, vulnerability has become associated with a perceived inevitably of wounding, rather than the possibility of it.

What is implicit in her mother's tendency to paranoid anxiety and belief in hyper-independence is the 'unexpected' and 'horrific' event of her younger sister's murder. Nelson, too, fears her own vulnerability to the violent forces that were responsible for her aunt's death. Referring to the book she published on the subject of her mother's younger sister she recalls that I 'nursed terrible fears: namely, that I would be murdered as Jane was, as punishment for my writerly transgressions'.[315] As if to confirm the fears of her and her mother, Nelson discovers she is being stalked by a man who has become obsessed with the book and believes that her '"aunt got what she deserved"'. The paranoid anxieties inherited from her mother become legitimised as 'the violence of the stalker's presence' seemed to become impossible to outrun. She begins to adopt her mother's paranoid mantras: '*There must be no bad surprises* [...] *You can never be paranoid enough*'.[316] For her mother, the arrival of the stalker confirms the anxieties she has felt since her sister's death: that women cannot let themselves become open to their vulnerabilities; 'Who could blame her? She's spent over forty years warding off the spectre of wingnuts with attaché cases who tell women they deserve their violent deaths before they occasion them.'[317] In *The Red Parts,* which Nelson wrote during the belated trial of the man accused of murdering her aunt, she begins

---

[311] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 150.
[312] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 127.
[313] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 127.
[314] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 127.
[315] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 142.
[316] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 145.
[317] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 153.

to understand her mother's need to believe in prophylactic anxiety as a way to produce an illusion of control. In the same way Ari revisits her grandmother's trauma, Nelson is undertaking a return narrative of her own, an affective re-imagining of the traumatic family history of her aunt's murder. By revisiting the loss of her aunt through autopsy photographs, newspaper articles and journal entries, she begins to understand where her mother's 'fantasy of a sovereign, impermeable self might have come from'.[318] Nelson's investigations uncover a causal link between living through the experience of her sister's murder and her mother's fantasy of being in control of her own 'impermeable, self-sufficient body, one not subject to uncontrollable needs or desires, be they its own or those of others [...] a body that cannot be injured, violated, or sickened unless it chooses to be'.[319] The physical wound left on her aunt's body becomes a psychic wound within Nelson's mother, which finds its form in a disdain for her own and others vulnerability. Whilst writing the account of Jane's murder, Nelson realized that 'this fear had trickled down to me also. An inheritance'.[320] Following the murder of her sister, Nelson's mother 'began to worry that she might be the next victim. As the case went unsolved, she kept worrying. Even visiting her sister's grave was a fraught experience as the police had told the family that Jane's murderer might visit also. To mourn Jane was literally to risk encountering her killer'.[321] Realising that she has inherited the same generational anxiety, Nelson suggests that: 'It took the writing of not only that book, but also an unintended sequel, for me to undo this knot, and hand its strands to the wind.'[322]

Returning to her childhood, Nelson remembers her introduction into paranoid anxiety following her father's unexpected death and the impulse to create 'prophylactic' narratives as a way not to prevent traumatic events from happening, but to fully prepare herself for various eventualities, no matter how outlandish. In a symbolic representation of her developing anxiety, she becomes attached to a story about a little boy who builds ships in the bottom of bottles and who believes that 'if you could imagine the worst thing that could ever happen, you would never be surprised when it did'.[323] With this in mind, Nelson begins to write horrifying narratives in her journal, including one in which her and her best friend are kidnapped by a deranged husband and wife team. She hypothesises that now they could 'never be kidnapped and tortured without our having foreseen it!'.[324] As an adult Nelson can see that her immature efforts to insulate herself from disaster, in the same way that the little boy created glass barriers to protect the ship that he has so carefully constructed from destruction, is the 'very definition of anxiety, as given by Freud ... "[the] state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one"'.[325]

---

[318] Maggie Nelson, *The Red Parts* (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 16.
[319] Nelson, *The Red Parts,* p. 15.
[320] Nelson, *The Red Parts,* p. 12.
[321] Nelson, *The Red Parts,* p. 12.
[322] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 142.
[323] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 148.
[324] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 148.
[325] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 148.

Distinct from fright or fear which is felt at the moment of danger, anxiety presents as a continual state of being for its sufferers and for Nelson, as is common for those struggling with lifelong anxiety, it follows a traumatic event during the vulnerability of her childhood. This behaviour is compounded and influenced by her mother's dependence on and demonstration of the same anxiety and, therefore, she lacks an antidote to her anxiety finding it mirrored in the behaviour of her mother. She is aware of its detrimental effect on her psyche but struggles to find the route out of it. Returning to the narrative of the little boy's building of ships in bottles, she wonders whether he was saved by a 'wise old crinkly grandpa' who 'disabuses his grandson of his rotten notion' ' that all good comes from repeatedly imagining the worst things that could ever happen'.[326] Instead of a wise grandparent, Nelson has her mother, 'who lives and breathes the gospel of prophylactic anxiety'.[327]

In motherhood, Nelson encounters another vulnerability over which she must be responsible: she must ensure the survival and flourishment of a helpless child. The fragile ship inside the glass bottle which symbolised her childhood anxieties has become the fetus inside her womb. Again, it is her task to predict or prevent possible calamities which may befall her loved one. Soon after her son is born, in a sleep-deprived state her 'intense happiness was sometimes punctured in the dead of night by the image of him with a half scissor sticking out of his precious newborn head [...] the very worst thing I could imagine'.[328] Again, this is a reactionary behaviour learned from her mother who sends Nelson emails during this time in which she tells her 'she's having trouble sleeping for fear of bad things happening to him (and to everyone else she loves)'.[329] On two occasions her mother tells her daughter of her visit to the 'Killing Tree' in Cambodia, the site of barbaric acts against babies by the Khmer Rouge. Nelson recognises in this act her mother's urge to install in her 'an outer parameter of horror of what could happen to a baby human on this planet [...] that she's stood before the Killing Tree'.[330] In her 'baby-killing-tree Tourette's' her mother is encouraging the same paranoid anxieties that have become part of her psyche as a response to historic trauma. Although this is undoubtedly a destructive impulse, arguably she is also attempting to create a kind of maternal solidarity with her daughter, by saying 'I know what it is like to try to mother with the paranoid anxieties that we share'. The act of childbearing opens women up to a host of new dangers, physical and emotional, most of which are unlikely to happen but nonetheless their presence exists as anxieties in the mother. During the pregnancy the mother can offer physical protection to the baby, keep the baby in the safe hidden sanctum of the womb, but the birth threatens this sense of protection: 'The task of the cervix is to stay closed [...] an impenetrable wall

[326] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 149.
[327] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 149.
[328] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 149.
[329] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 150.
[330] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 151.

protecting the fetus [...] by means of labour, the wall must somehow become an opening. This happens through dilation, which is not a shattering, but an extreme thinning. *(O so thin!)*'.[331] Nelson's uterus becomes the glass bottle which protects the fragile ship built by the little boy in her childhood story; the walls of the uterus do not shatter as the bottle might, but they must become open, in order to release the fetus from its amniotic safety. The release of the baby into the outside world works against all of Nelson's inherited prophylactic anxieties, her mother's dream of impermeability, as she cannot prevent or control the fetus or herself from the impending force of labour. The cervix must become open in order for the fetus to be delivered into being and thus the arrival of motherhood creates a corporeal wound in the mother. What is protected by its interiority is transformed into a state of vulnerable exteriority. In the moment of childbirth the mother must allow her body and mind to break apart: 'It's easy enough to stand on the outside and say, "You just have to let go and let the baby out." But to let the baby out, you have to be willing to go to pieces.'[332] The ship inside the bottle cannot be released without breaking open the bottle itself; in this analogy, the mother becomes as fragile as the baby.

As a memoirist, Nelson is aware that she must publicise what she perceives to be her innermost vulnerabilities and anxieties. Rather than succumbing to the paranoid anxieties of her mother, Nelson chooses to face them by including the stalker episode in one of her talks. In this way, she hopes to confront and release the anxieties that she shares with her mother back into the world. Feeling like the 'final girl in a horror movie', painfully aware of her own vulnerabilities as a woman, a mother, as half of a gender fluid couple, she finds solace 'in articulation itself as its own form of protection'.[333] During her tour for the book *The Art of Cruelty*, she is visibly pregnant and knows that she can no longer cling to the protective mantras of self-sufficiency and independence. She discovers that she is not only vulnerable as a woman in public, but that she can no longer hide the vulnerability of her pregnant body as it carries its precious cargo. She realises that as she exposes herself, the undeniable fragility of her body in pregnancy is also exposed. Thus, the exposing of herself through her writing is doubled as she goes from singular to a pair.

Melancholic Identification

Heti remembers her mother's constant sadness during her childhood, that as 'long as I have known her, I have known her to cry'.[334] As a child Heti imagined that she was responsible for her mother's sadness; she does not know the root of the melancholic crying, therefore in her state of innocence,

---

[331] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* pp. 154-155.
[332] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 155.
[333] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* pp. 153-154.
[334] Heti, p. 15.

in which she believed she was 'the cause of even the stars in the sky', she assumes it to be her.[335] Reflective of the infantile views by the child during their primary identification with the mother, the child believes she and the mother are unified and that she is responsible for any distress exhibited by the mother. In this scenario, the child is likely to feel they must take on the responsibility of guarding against their mother's unhappiness and therefore lessen the attacks committed by the mother towards the child because of the child's bad behaviour. As a child Heti tries to find ways in which she could alter her behaviour to save her mother from the sadness that she had caused, and, in fact, it is a task to which she has devoted her life. However, because the melancholia was planted in her mother before Heti was born, it is something she can change neither through her behaviour nor through her relationship to her mother. Yet, throughout her childhood, Heti sees herself as solely to blame for her mother's depression, she feels guilty that her existence is the cause and attempts to adapt her behaviour around the personal temperament of her mother. In turn, every action of her mother becomes evidence of her mother's contempt towards her as well as her own capacity to only provoke anger and disappoint in her mother. The criticism Heti witnesses her mother make of her in a home video from her childhood, in which she sees 'a look of disgust' on her mother's face, works to reinforce her sense that she is the main target of her mother's 'contempt', and as 'proof that she did not love me'.[336] Heti recalls that, as a child, 'I never understood what she thought was so wrong about me, so I concluded everything was wrong'.[337] As an adult Heti is able to view the situation objectively, that she alone cannot be the cause of her mother's unhappiness, but the feelings of being 'helplessly wrong' and the unachievable wish to live 'as a person beyond criticism' remain influential within her.

As her mother's melancholia appears to her, Heti's tendency towards depression appears to her to be an inevitable birth right. Along with working to 'solve the problem' of her mother's sadness, she has spent her life 'compulsively' checking for signs that she might have inherited the same unhappiness: 'Then I grew unhappy, too. I grew filled up with tears.'[338] Increasingly, through the text, she begins to exhibit the characteristic symptoms of melancholia, those of 'profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world' and a 'lowering of self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment'.[339] There is evidence of her anxiety and poor self-regard in the paranoia Heti feels in relation to her partner Miles; the anxious dreams that she has, involving him abandoning her because of her inadequacies, soon come to invade her waking consciousness.

---

[335] Heti, p. 15.
[336] Heti, p. 80.
[337] Heti, p. 80.
[338] Heti, p. 15.
[339] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *Sigmund Freud on Metapsychology* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 251-268, p. 252.

Following a succession of these dreams along with a degradation of her mental health, she surmises that:

> This morning, Miles implied I was not someone a man could build a life with or rely upon [...] it's true that whatever you are inside, other people will see it [...] What's the point in acting sweet and accommodating to others when I'm a stranger to myself? What's the good in pointing morning smiles at Miles, or trying to get smiles from him in the morning, when I feel such a blackness in my chest?
> Tears and more tears this morning. Not actually crying, but the feeling of wanting to cry. Confusion, neglect.[340]

Heti increasingly projects her fears of abandonment by the loved object, originating in her impoverished relationship with her mother, onto her relationship with Miles. She pulls away from him, as well as others who serve only to remind her of her deficiencies through their success, and retreats into herself. Particularly, she retreats from friends who have become mothers, who remind her, in her moments of irrationality, of her lack of this particular cultural understanding of female validity. The strain of being around other people, in which she is brought to tears by 'the feeling of [her own] personality', drives her into a wish for solitude, during which instead of bearing the weight of her impaired 'personality', she can escape into the obscurity of 'the whole universe'.[341] She steps into the footsteps of her mother through this behaviour, remembering when her mother would 'suddenly be crying' during a family dinner.[342] On these occasions, Heti would follow her mother to the bedroom, 'but [her mother] would not open the door, would tell me to go away – she was unwilling to see me or be comforted'.[343] Heti's beratement of herself during moments of depression are not only a reflection of how she feels about herself, but also her resentment towards her mother for her mother's remoteness and hostility – ultimately it is based in her desire to understand her mother, revealed in the feeling that she is a stranger to herself. Heti's attacks against herself align with Freud's understanding of the angry self-accusations of the melancholic, who 'fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or is supposed to love'.[344] Therefore, the self-reproaches are veiled 'reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego'.[345]

In *After Birth,* Ari is thrown off guard when she hallucinates an encounter with her deceased mother on a subway platform one night during her teenage years. In a drunken haze, a 'filthy', mad

---

[340] Heti, p. 111.
[341] Heti, p. 121.
[342] Heti, p. 225.
[343] Heti, p. 225.
[344] Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 257.
[345] Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 257.

woman stumbles towards her across the platform. It soon becomes clear that this figure is her mother, who has appeared as a ghost to Ari in order to berate and condemn her; this is one of a number of imagined encounters with her mother throughout the text. In this encounter, we might think of Michealis' description of Ruth Kjar's painting of the old woman with 'tired' 'troubled' eyes, who bears 'the mark of years and disillusionments'.[346] As if to find the understanding and reciprocity that she couldn't achieve while her mother was living, Ari keeps her house 'like a shrine' filled with photographs of her mother. A tableau of a mysterious life in the pictures, Ari sees her mother as strangely 'quiet in her late thirties, owl glasses reflecting the light from a window as she gazes down at me, newborn in her arms staring blankly back'.[347] She yearns to establish a link with her mother, by searching portraits for answers and the imagined conversations; the temporary blindness of the mother and daughter in the photograph represents their struggle to connect in reality. There are no photographs of her and her mother at her father's house and, in this way, Ari separates mother and daughter into a kind of ostracised familial solidarity. Ari's haunting by her absent mother suggests a failure by Ari to move beyond acknowledgement of the loss of her mother, a wound that has never healed in her unconscious mind. Because of the unresolved feelings Ari has towards her mother, in this moment her mind chooses to defy reality. If the work of mourning is incomplete because of an unwillingness to accept the loved one as gone, the mourner will expel a vast amount of psychic energy to keep the lost object alive in the unconscious and, in the most extreme way, by 'clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis'.[348] In this way, we can see that Ari's mind in the text is simultaneously in a state of mourning of a real object and a melancholy or 'pathological mourning' caused by the unconscious loss of the role that object did or could have played in her life.

That Ari's mother returns as a malevolent figure suggests the nature of Ari's unresolved feelings towards her: she is concerned that her mother will seek to destroy her as retribution for Ari's unwitting role in her death, which took place both in reality and phantasy. Driven by the same desire of restitution as Heti in her narrative, Ari imagines that my ''mother is disappearing, she may never return, she is suffering, she is dead. No, this can't be, for I can revive her''.[349] The desire to revive the murdered mother is also a desire to revive the self, the parts of the psyche so closely associated with the mother, for the sake of the reparation and resolution of the ambivalent feelings towards the mother *and* the self. Kjar's troubled old woman and Albert's filthy mad woman are representations of themselves as well as their mothers, the two identities being so closely related in each unconscious. Again, it is clear that Ari has so deeply ingrained her mother's image within her own psyche that her mother has come to embody distinct parts of her mentality and view of the

[346] Klein, 'Infantile Anxiety Situations', p. 93.
[347] Albert, p. 57.
[348] Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 253.
[349] Klein, 'Some Theoretical Conclusions', p. 214.

outside world. The parts are all experienced by Ari as antagonistic; they feel oppressive, depressive, anxious, isolating, and feed her paranoia about her inadequacies, particularly regarding mothering. In this sense, Ari has introjected the persecutory maternal object, withdrawn it into her unconscious, as a reaction to her destructive phantasies toward the object – the two actions are intertwined. As Klein states, the 'drive to project (expel) badness is increased by fear of internal persecutors. When projection is dominated by persecutory fear, the object into whom badness (the bad self) has been projected becomes [...] endowed with all the bad qualities of the subject'.[350] In her imaginings, Ari's mother behaves like a raging drunkard, returning to attack her and to air her grievances: '*What the fuck are you looking at? [...] You think I wanted this? You think I chose this? I won't take your crap, you ungrateful little shit! You think the world owes you something? The world owes you nothing*!'[351] Ari is unable to escape from the guilt she feels over murdering her mother and this is a partial drive for her desire for reparation; as her mother is physically lost, this reparation must be made through a series of hallucinated interactions. For Ari, the guilt over her mother's death is complicated by the negative feelings she held toward her in life. Klein states that the child's death wish towards the parent, which in the course of infant development is inevitable, is felt to have come into actuality after the parent's real death and, thus, the parent's death, 'however shattering for other reasons, is to some extent also felt as a victory, and gives rise to triumph, and therefore all the more guilt'.[352] Advised by her childhood therapist to voice the 'powerful' feelings about her grief, Ari visits her mother's gravesite; '*Sorry you're dead, Mom, I love you* the best I could come up with, and a lie.'[353] Ari not only introjects her mother into her psyche, whom she associates with melancholia, temperamentality, and anger, and hence taking on these traits as her own, but as an adult, holds onto her grief which distorts into melancholia; in this way, she experiences a complex 'double helping' of melancholia which she must resolve.

For Klein, the experience of triumph, which induces a feeling of guilt, over the passing of a loved one is inevitable even in normal mourning but is exaggerated when hatred of the lost loved one predominates. If the hatred of the loved object 'gets the upper hand in the mourner, this not only turns the loved lost person into a persecutor, but shakes the mourners belief in his good inner objects'.[354] If the good inner objects are brought into question, then the hatred for the lost object becomes internalised. Developing Freud's work on mourning and melancholia, Klein suggests that the work of mourning 'reactivates' the infantile depressive position; the anxieties, guilt and feelings of loss and grief, as well as the strong emotions of persecution that come with the fears of

---

[350] Klein, 'Some Theoretical Conclusion', p. 207.
[351] Albert, p. 157.
[352] Melanie Klein, 'Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States', in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 146-174, p. 157.
[353] Albert, p. 58.
[354] Klein, 'Mourning', p. 157.

being robbed and punished by the parent, are revived from within the deep layers of the mind.[355] The mechanisms of mourning and the depressive position mirror each other in their 'testing of reality', so that the child in the depressive phase 'goes through states of mind comparable to the mourning of an adult, or rather, that this early mourning is revived whenever grief is experienced in later life'.[356] As we have seen, the 'reality testing' of the infantile depressive phase and those of mourning are compounded and entangled *because* of the irresolution of the former. This repetition is even more prevalent in Ari as, in her unconscious mind, the phantasies at play in the infantile depressive position, those of greedily attacking the mother's breast and the resultant fear over the loss of the loved and desired object, are felt to have been the cause of the physical loss of the external mother. Not only are Ari's destructive phantasies towards her mother felt to have been made real to her, she has been unable to balance and internalise the 'good' and 'bad' aspects of her mother, which plays a major role in progressing past the depressive position. Ari had failed to resolve her infantile depressive position at the time of her mother's death because her mother was predominantly a figure that provoked fear of punishment and whose moments of affection towards her daughter were so fleeting as to be unable to establish themselves in Ari's psyche. (Although, as we have previously discovered, these behaviours and feelings in the mother were inherited from the grandmother and caused by an original trauma partly associated with childbirth.) According to Klein, during the depressive phase, 'the enjoyments which the baby lives through in relation to his mother are so many proofs to him that the loved object *inside as well as outside* is not injured, is not turned into a vengeful person. The increase of love and trust, and the diminishing of fears through happy experiences, help the baby step by step to overcome his depression and feeling of loss (mourning)'.[357] As with Heti, the 'proofs' from Ari's mother are perceived to be overwhelmingly 'bad', the 'injury' is confirmed and maintained, and the mother becomes a consistently 'vengeful' person. Hence, Ari cannot overcome the depression and feeling of loss experienced during the early developmental stages. As well as projecting these expectations and feelings onto the women she encounters, it is clear that Ari has most forcefully turned these feelings upon herself after her mother's death. She expects failure, punishes herself most severely for her mistakes, is quick to find weakness in herself, is anxious about her inadequacies, and deems herself to be unworthy of the love of others. The 'bad' qualities she sees in herself, in fact, reflect the mental attacks she once experienced from her mother, who has been established as an imposing and undermining presence in her mind.

Shared Curse

---

[355] Klein, 'Mourning', p. 156.
[356] Klein, 'Mourning', p. 147.
[357] Klein, 'Mourning', p. 149.

The legacy of female melancholia is simultaneously desired and feared; the emotional inheritance between Heti and her mother brings her closer and creates a link to a mother who is otherwise distant, yet, at the same time, she has spent her life attempting to outrun the shared 'curse'. She identifies the affective inheritance and works to halt its advancement; she tells herself let 'the pattern which is the repeating, which was your mother, and her mother before her, live it a little bit differently this time'.[358] Her growing depression through the text is measured against her mother's: 'This is the [sic] same age as when your mother was miserable, and also constantly in tears. It could be a biological phase. Or it could be the choices you've made.'[359] Whether she is hinting at a peri-menopause or her indecisive attitude toward having children, Heti is aligning her experiences with those of her mother's – who had children but struggled with the task of mothering, her focus being so much turned away towards her own mother. When she discovers a bottle of anti-depressants in her mother's medicine cabinet in the final passages of the text after battling with her own growing reliance on the medication, it is another window into her mother's mind and their shared experiences: 'It suddenly made sense: I felt I could identify any memory of my mother as either being on the drugs or off them. On them, she is more cheerful, warm and delightful. Off them, she is sad and withdrawn, but more poignant in some ways – a towering figure with tremendous power.'[360] This speaks to Heti's desire to understand her mother's behaviour, partly to explain her own, as well as the immense influence the 'towering' maternal figure continues to have on Heti's ongoing self-reproach and low self-esteem.

Through the process of writing and publishing a book dedicated to her mother Heti hopes to finally interrupt and resolve the shared sadness – to heal the wound. She writes 'backwards' through time towards her mother, her 'ancestors', rather than 'forwards' towards children, suggesting that her 'sense of eternity is backwards through time. The farther back in time I can go, the deeper into eternity I feel I can pierce'.[361] Part of what stops her from wanting children, from living 'forwards', is her sense of the unfinished business of her mother and her maternal ancestors. She tasks herself with fixing the problems of the past rather than reproducing them in the present. As well as resolving the unknown 'curse', Heti feels she must atone for the pain she has inflicted upon her mother and she attempts to do this through her art. In this way, as a daughter, Heti has failed to overcome the feelings of guilt in infancy which precede the reparatory stage of development. Like Albert, she believes herself to be responsible for her mother's suffering, imagining that through actions obscure to her she causes injury to her original object of love and pleasure. As per Klein's estimations, these feelings of guilt over the harm caused to the maternal object translate into the desire for reparation. When reparation is not achieved in infancy, the guilt

[358] Heti, p. 197.
[359] Heti, p. 121.
[360] Heti, p. 256.
[361] Heti, p. 120.

persists into adulthood. The guilt over the wound inflicted upon the mother by the child that lingers in the maternal line originates in Heti's mother who felt that her actions directly caused her mother's death. Believing that her emigration to America caused her mother's death which followed soon afterwards, Heti's mother's mourning is overtaken by the guilt she feels over destroying her mother. Therefore, the daughter's desire for reparation and recovery of the mother is never-ending and unattainable, resulting in an unconscious prolonged identification with the unchangeable past and the adoption of a pathological mourning.[362] The unresolved object loss means that 'the shadow of the object' falls upon the ego, presenting itself in the outward projection of melancholia and self-denigration for causing the loss of the loved object. By the time this projection reaches Heti through her mother, it has moved beyond the identifiable state of mourning and guilt over the death of her mother to become a melancholia with an unknown cause. This goes some way in explaining Heti's identification with her mother's sadness and why she feels an impulse to repair it, for the sake of her mother's happiness as well as her own.

Much like the intergenerational trauma inherited from her grandmother, Heti's prolonged melancholia has no discernible cause in her own life; the book represents an affective historical journey into the unresolved guilt, grief and trauma which influences the Heti maternal line. The crossover between the signifiers of intergenerational trauma and melancholia - feelings of unidentifiable loss, fear and rejection of the outside world, need to look 'backwards' in time to figure out the present - are important here because, for Heti, Nelson, and Albert's central character Ari, they are rooted in a past which they did not directly experience. Hence, the experiences of the third-generation of the family who lived through significant trauma and loss are able to pick up on the affective clues from their mothers and in time replicate them, but they are too far removed to recognise the original cause. The mental features of intergenerational trauma and melancholic identification were well-established during the early years of the third generation but could not be processed until adulthood. We may return to Knight's patient who reported the feeling of an 'alien living inside' her psyche to understand that Heti, Nelson, and Ari, too, have an alien living inside them which represents the fallen 'shadow' of their mother's ego resulting from the historical loss and trauma which caused their mothers to become emotionally distant to their daughters and melancholic themselves. Approaching it in this way, we might consider the feelings of melancholia and anxiety experienced by the protagonists of each text to be due to their internalisation and projection of the mother's ego following the loss of the mother; the loss of the mother able to be traced back to the original trauma/wound and loss which invited the 'alien' inside.

Route to Reparation

[362] Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 260.

On the morning she is due to visit her mother's new house, Heti dreams of a woman named Tou Charin who accompanies her on the journey. Whilst dreaming, she wonders whether Tou Charin might represent Charon, the ferryman to Hades. Later, Heti receives an email from a former professor reminding her that in Greek literature a descent into the underworld always has a dreamlike quality and the reason for the journey is to bring the dead back into the world of the living. This is a metaphor used by Hoffman to interpret the reparative work of the post-generation: the underworld is the unconscious realm of the trauma and loss, 'Orpheus's song cannot bring back those claimed by the underworld, but it can become richer for his sojourn there'.[363] Continuing with this thread, Hoffman suggests that the 'urge to rescue, to repair and salve, which we felt so painfully in our early transactions with wounded parents, can transform itself – if it is contained in sufficient frameworks of emotional safety – into the re-creative and reconstructive urge, into the desire for creativity and interpretation'.[364] On the subway platform, travelling to her mother's house, she sees two dogs who become separated and discover themselves heading in opposite directions, the second dog stepping 'onto a train going in the wrong direction from its companions'.[365] In this scenario, Heti is the second dog travelling 'backwards' through the 'soul of time' towards her mother and grandmother, rather than 'forwards' in time towards the possibility of children. On arrival at the house, her mother shows her a door that opens onto a vast and cavernous barn that the house had been built up from. Heti feels dizzy, 'like she was showing me her unconscious, the basement of her mind'.[366] The visit to her mother's house represents a meeting of their shared unconscious, which Heti accesses through her dreams guided by Tou Charin. Whilst staying with her mother, Heti finds herself with a desperate need to sleep – this follows a period of depression in which she struggled with insomnia – therefore, the strong urge to sleep suggests that she is finally ready to face the obscure and troubled aspects of her unconscious. Not only does the journey to her mother's house represent a return to a pre-Oedipal state of shared consciousness with her mother, but to the retrieval and resolution of her traumatic maternal history in the soul of time.

Ready to face the conclusion of her return narrative, Heti travels back through time in a dream she has whilst at her mother's house. The dream begins with a mirror, through which Heti knows she must to pass; upon leaping through the mirror, she finds herself falling down 'a tubal organ – a vagina or a trachea'.[367] Re-entering the vagina is a way of returning to the mother's womb, the point of origin, to a moment in which we are unquestionably tethered physically and psychically to the mother. In the dream, Heti perceives the womb-like space to represent her psyche and the 'dank

[363] Hoffman, p. 191.
[364] Hoffman, p. 191.
[365] Heti, p. 250.
[366] Heti, p. 252.
[367] Heti, p. 254.

basement of her childhood home'.[368] Her mother's womb then becomes the origin of the present composition of Heti's psyche – symbolically the place in which her self and her mother remain one. Once in the basement of her childhood home, she discovers in a family album a photograph of her mother's face, 'with the expression she had always worn when I was a child: full of mistrust, unhappiness and distance. Then I turned the page and saw a close-up of another face – smiling, and full of big, white teeth and happy eyes'.[369] When Heti wakes, she senses that she may choose to inhabit either one of these two faces of her mother, yet 'how deep inside me my mother's face was! How it lay in the basement, the unfinished barn, of my soul.[370]' The dream is a revelation; it shows that her lifelong malaise and anxiety is rooted in the early conflictual relation to her mother which was integrated into her psyche, and the possibility of moving beyond this position.

The entire section in her mother's home demonstrates the extent to which Heti's identity is still firmly rooted in that of her mother's: as in childhood, she waits for clues from her mother on how she should feel and behave. Whether it is living alone as a woman or caring less about other's opinions, her mother paves the way for Heti's identity formation. Heti is taken aback when her mother appears not to care about a disagreement she has had with Heti's father and brother: 'When she said this – *So what? I'm not going to go hang myself* – it did something inside me. If she is not going to hang herself, then neither am I – not for any reason at all.'[371] Suddenly, Heti seems to understand that self-flagellation is not the only possible reaction upon learning that you may have caused somebody harm. Of course, the person for whom Heti feels she has committed the most wrongdoing is her mother; therefore, her mother's reaction not only gives Heti a new template from which to negotiate her own social interactions, but, also, allows her to believe that her mother has 'forgiven' her for the perceived original injury caused by her infantile destructive phantasies. The return to her mother's home marks the resolution of the lifelong persecutory anxiety and guilt she has felt over the phantasised and real pain that she has caused her mother - the root of the arrested development which in turn caused her prolonged melancholia. In her eyes, Heti has regained the love of the mother and thus resolved her own melancholia. Her mother has moved beyond her own guilt, anxiety and 'backward' glance over the death of Heti's grandmother, evidenced in her display of contentment at her home and this allows Heti to do the same. She will continue to invest her ego formation within her mother's and will not abandon this position, but it will no longer be an impoverished ego; she considers, 'Do you ever feel like you cannot grow beyond your mother? So it's wonderful when your mother climbs one step higher on the ladder from where she had been standing before'.[372]

---

[368] Heti, p. 254.
[369] Heti, p. 254.
[370] Heti, p. 254.
[371] Heti, p. 258.
[372] Heti, p. 258.

Heti feels she can restore the 'good', happy mother that lives in conflict alongside the unhappy mother within her psyche. Because of the continued closeness of the self with the mother, the recovery of the good mother image inside the unconscious of the daughter can revive her own self-image; arguably, this has been Heti's goal throughout her life and is the central endeavour of the book. It is a goal that she shares with Klein's subject Ruth Kjar, who finally overcame her depression by painting a portrait of her mother in which she depicted her triumphantly as 'a magnificent woman', thereby repairing the damage deemed to have been caused by her injury to the mother in infancy, which was at the core of the daughter's depression.

The completion of the narrative also marks the resolution of the intergenerational trauma, the shared 'curse' and sadness that, Heti realises, originated in her great-grandmother who 'was so poor that she lived in a house with dirt floors, and [who] died young of the flu [...] leaving behind four children. It was she whose orphaned children were taken to Auschwitz, and one of them killed in the camps'.[373] Heti is merely the carrier of the family curse – by giving her the middle name Magdalen, she 'put her mother inside me' – hence, the memoir becomes a medium through which to release the story of intergenerational trauma. Whilst previous generations have tried to heal the wound of trauma through working towards the prosperity of themselves and their children, Heti chooses the act of writerly creation. If creating a child is an act of retribution against an historic oppressor, then Heti surmises that a book represents a more immovable object. She is *writing* 'backwards' towards her mother and grandmother:

> I think I don't want our flesh – my mother's flesh, my grandmother's flesh – to just be divided and replicated. I want their life to be counted. I want to make a child that will not die – a body that will speak and keep on speaking, which can't be shot or burned up. You can't burn every copy of a single book [...] To make a creature that lives inside many bodies, not just one body that is so vulnerable.[374]

Through the creation of the memoir, Heti is simultaneously gestating the bodies of her mothers and mourning them, 'as if publishing a book is like scattering ashes from an urn'.[375]

For Ari, the journey towards reparation is not able to be made in connection with a real, living mother, having only an internal mother figure with which to negotiate her feelings of persecution. Though the revival of her mother through hallucinations is initially a continuation of the hostility she felt from her mother whilst she was alive in reality and in phantasy, the imagined conversations become more constructive over time. By the conclusion of the text, Ari's mother still hangs like a threatening spectre, but she is ready to move on: '*So you're finally growing up,* my mother says

---

[373] Heti, p. 275.
[374] Albert, p. 199.
[375] Heti, p. 276.

[...] I feel aged [...] I think I might see her reflection if I look up at the darkened window, but it's so fogged up that I can't even see myself.'[376] Her understanding of her self is intricately tied up with her mother's identity as well as, in Ari's eyes, her mother's feelings about her, rooted in the persecutory anxiety of her infancy. Her mother continues to exist in her psyche, a shadow fallen upon the ego after the real and phantasised loss. The persecutory phantasies and anxieties she once felt towards her mother before grief came into play, had been supplanted onto her self and other women, particularly those who might present as mother figures, in the shape of 'substitutive objects'. After the real or imagined loss of a loved object, the love and hate originating in this object 'cannot be given up though the object itself is given up – [it] takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering'.[377] Following the loss of her mother, Ari had tormented herself and other women in the same way that she feels her mother tormented her and that she caused suffering to her mother; the original mother-daughter relationship is shifted onto substitute objects. Her mother/her self suggests that: '*You only want a woman you can save. Or one who can save you. Avoiding pain will get you nowhere. Avoiding pain multiplies pain exponentially* .'[378] As part of Ari's reparation, she must work to build new relationships with her self and other women beyond the template of the original mother-daughter dynamic. The relationship she forms with Mina through the text, which represents her first balanced female friendship, runs in tandem with her acquiescence to the co-existence of 'bad' and 'good' in the relationship with her mother. When she perceives Mina to be abandoning her by moving in with her sister in Brooklyn, it is a re-enactment of her mother's abandonment which left the 'open wound' in Ari's psyche; an abandonment that was caused by Ari's destructive phantasies. The loss of Mina also mirrors the repeated loss of every other woman and girl in Ari's life, following her mother. Yet, Mina returns; she has weathered Ari's reactionary rage and through the symbolic gift of a nursing bead, we know that the relationship will continue where before it would have been destroyed.

The conclusion of the text is marked by Ari's final reparation with her mother, which is performed, in the absence of her real mother, through a substitute mother. She meets an older female acquaintance in the deli and they exchange friendly words about the trials of mothering: the woman admits, '*I had a really bad time of it'* and Ari realises she's 'kind of a badass; I never saw it before [...] She brushes a piece of hair out of my eyes. Dare I call it maternal? [...] And I don't hate her. I don't have a problem with her at all. She's fine by me. So maybe I'm better'.[379] Shortly before this encounter, Ari has dreamed of giving birth to a girl, having previously been resistant to

[376] Albert, p. 189.
[377] Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 260.
[378] Albert, p. 178.
[379] Albert, p. 194.

the idea of a daughter and being openly hostile to the women in her life. In dreaming of 'a new girl, fresh and soft', Ari has gained reparation with the original 'bad' mother, worked to resolve historic female trauma within her family, and become reborn.

Conclusion

For Heti, Nelson, and Albert, the act of writing and publishing the stories functions as a way to transform the previously unrepresentational, nonsymbolised process of loss experienced by themselves and their maternal ancestors which is the origin of their melancholia. Through illuminating their own and their mother's legacy of trauma and grief, the sense of loss associated with 'normal' development and that which is inherited through intergenerational trauma, they bring the secrets hidden within the unconscious into the open – to exorcise the ghost of the historic trauma and to heal the 'open wound' of the shared sadness. As Hoffman returns to the idea of 'shadows to wrestle with', she suggests that for the post-generation, 'only a full imaginative confrontation with the past – however uncanny, however unknown – can bring the haunting to an end'.[380] The unconscious loss of the mother during infancy, which presents in a similar way to intergenerational trauma, is a loss 'that radically escapes any representation. Whence the impossibility of mourning it'.[381] As with Ruth Kjar's impulse to fill the 'blank space', the writers seek to resurrect the mother image in order to process and overcome their own anxiety and depression. They seek to fill the 'inner void', the core of depression which 'springs from the destruction of the representation of the good mother as a stabilizing psychological gestalt', through the creative process of writing the return narrative.[382]

---

[380] Hoffman, p. 73.
[381] Irigaray, 'A Very Black Sexuality?', p. 68.
[382] Olsen, Ole Andkjaer, 'Depression and Reparation as Themes in Melanie Klein's Analysis of the Painter Ruth Weber', *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 27:1 (2004) pp. 34-42, p. 36.

Chapter 3: Maternal Subjectivity and the Maternal Text

This chapter is concerned with two questions: firstly, what subjectivity arises out of the mother's exchange with the child? And, secondly, how does this subjectivity shape the form of the written maternal narrative? Prior feminist work has striven to grant the mother her subjectivity, but this chapter intends to go beyond this aim in order to discover what specific kind of subjectivity the task of motherhood engenders. At its basis, the chapter will seek to discover '*how the mother feels about what she feels and what she does with what she feels*'.[383] The chapter will take its lead from Baraitser's phenomenology of motherhood, as she questions what it is like to encounter the 'unknowable' child. In essence, what 'is it like to be in the world with this extra unpredictable limb, to be dis-abled by motherhood, made to experience ourselves, our relations, our kinetic being, our spatio-temporal orientations anew, to be constantly 'thrown off the subject' by motherhood?'.[384] In the vein of Baraitser's work, the chapter will consider how women navigate and understand their maternal subjectivity. It will examine the ways in which the task of motherhood interrupts women's time and how maternal interruption provokes a change in the experience of the self. Connected to the sensation of interruption, minor and substantial, is the mother's experience of being 'outside herself', alienated from her pre-maternal subjectivity and estranged from the public domain. The chapter will conduct an exploration into the mother-child unit from the point of view of the mother, seeking to understand how the mother manages the deep ambivalences provoked by pregnancy and early motherhood. It will ask how the mother withstands the knot of emotions and sensations of being with the child/other: those of love and hate, connection and disconnection, desire, boredom, fatigue, vulnerability, and so on. Inevitably an examination of maternal subjectivity will need to recognise the external environment beyond that of the mother and child, the cultural and historical circumstances within which motherhood takes place, but this will not be the central focus of the chapter. Instead, the analysis will seek to remain within the mother's psyche, exploring the somatic, psychological, and philosophical ramifications of maternal experience.

The maternal narratives to be discussed in this chapter share thematic and formal commonalities; it will be the parallels between *what* experience they present and *how* they portray it for the reader that will build the central thesis. In short, the writers allow the maternal event to organise the form and structure of the text. The experiences of interruption and repetition, of multiplicity and alterity, and the question of ambiguous transformation are echoed in the fragmentary, non-linear structure of the texts. The central argument will be that by telling the story

---

[383] Kraemer, '"Betwixt the Dark and the Daylight" of Maternal Subjectivity: Meditations on the Threshold', p. 768.
[384] Baraitser, Lisa, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 153.

of becoming and being a mother in a way that refuses traditional generic classification and instead, embraces a form that is dictated by the formative encounter with the child, the writers of these maternal texts and the characters they produce are creating an innovative form of literature. It is an evolving subgenre that attempts to reframe the maternal, domestic narrative into a form that has philosophical, literary, and intellectual consequence by imagining the mundane and intimate alongside 'contra-standard' features such as critical theory, philosophy, and literary allusions.

Section I

Interruption and Repetition

Baraitser asserts that the relentlessness of minute as well as major interruption into the mother's subjective experience forms a basis for fundamental understandings of maternal subjectivity, that the fissure the child presents in the mother's daily life and mode of thinking presents the potential for a different way of being. Through her own personal anecdotal inquiry Baraitser expresses the immense physical power of her child's cry to wrench her into the '*pitilessness of the present tense'*; as it '*pulls me out of whatever I was embedded in, and before I have a chance to re-equilibrate, it pulls me out again. There are days that follow nights that follow days in which I am punch-drunk from interruption*.'[385] In Rachel Cusk's memoir, her child's cries interrupt her 'vision of adult normality', as she reports that 'I have run home with her bawling in my arms, pulling the pram crazily behind us while people stare. I have jumped off buses in the middle of nowhere. I have bolted from cafes. I have ended telephone conversations without explanation'.[386] The maternal interruptions cast her into the 'middle of nowhere', as time and again the demands of her daughter have brought her into a temporal immediacy. In an echo of Baraitser's maternal experience as the '*pitilessness of the present tense*', Cusk states that to 'be a mother I must leave the telephone unanswered, work undone, arrangements unmet. To be myself I must let the baby cry, must forestall her hunger or leave her for evenings out, must forget her in order to think of other things'.[387] In this view, the arrival of the baby into the mother's life signals an interruption into her capacity to fulfil the actions and behaviours that she feels are integral to maintaining a semblance not only of her pre-maternal self, but to sustaining a coherent subjectivity at all. The effect of the maternal interruption takes Cusk away from herself through her ethical responsibility to take care of the demands of her child. As depicted by Baraitser, Cusk is a mother who must turn 'herself

[385] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 66
[386] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 69.
[387] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 57.

towards a child mid-sentence, mid-mouthful, mid-thought, or in the middle of the night,' as 'she often makes herself available without finishing the things that replenish her'.[388]

The temporal urgency of living with a child's demands and the expectations of motherhood is evident in Jenny Offill's maternal narrative too. The mother in *Dept. of Speculation* describes being limited in her movements and thoughts by her child's incessant cries: 'I only ventured out of the house with her when we were desperate for food or diapers, and then I only went as far as Rite Aid [...] the farthest distance I could sprint if she started screaming again and I had to go home. These calculations were important because she screamed a lot in those days.'[389] In these moments, the only predictable factor is that the mother will often be interrupted by her crying child, but the unknown when and where of this break in flow leaves her in a perpetual state of dreaded anticipation. As repetitious as a baby's cries may become for the mother, it represents a significant emotional event each time it happens. The sudden change in emotional states in the child produces a similarly deeply felt shift in the emotional state of the mother, ranging from panic, resentment, fatigue, anger, etc. The mother who hears her infant cry, which is the basic expression of human pain, will feel the weight of inadequacy, guilt, and shame, to feel to be the cause of such distress and powerless to alleviate it.[390] Baraitser terms these moments of intense and sudden emotion, 'micro-blows', suggesting that, 'in their multiplicity, their relentlessness and their ability to dis-organize experience form the very ground of mothering'.[391] Whether the mother instantly bends to soothe the child or attempts to delay pacification, she is brought into the immediate moment again and again.

The daily, hourly, moment by moment disturbance is felt keenly in Sarah Manguso's memoir, in which she remarks that since the arrival of the baby, she was left only with the 'mute ability to wait for the next minute, the next hour'.[392] Like Cusk, Manguso finds that during the endless time of waiting for unexpected interruptions, 'for the baby to feed or stop feeding or burp or pass wind or yellow liquid shit I postponed showers, phone calls, bowel movements. I ignored correspondence because I had no energy even to say *I am so tired'*.[393] The interruption by the child's urgent needs prevents the mother from completing activities that once sustained her and created a sense of subjectivity; whether it is caring for her personal hygiene, speaking with friends, reading a book, or as is especially pertinent for the women who are the subject and authors of these texts: having the time and space to write. There are two central obstructing factors that the entrance of a child into the life of the maternal writer presents: firstly, in a practical sense, writing is a solitary task that is often incompatible with the full-time care of a child, and secondly, the

---

[388] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 67
[389] Jenny Offill, *Dept. of Speculation* (London: Granta, 2014), pp. 23-24.
[390] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 72
[391] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 68
[392] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 55.
[393] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 55.

interruption by repetitive domestic labour necessitates an altered kind of thinking to that of the pre-maternal self. As Nelson concedes in *The Argonauts*, 'here's the catch: *I cannot hold my baby at the same time as I write'.*[394] During the sporadic periods of her baby's extended sleep, Cusk liaises with a 'former life', when she is able to 'read, or work or talk, and am enjoying it when she wakes up unexpectedly and cries; and then the pain of moving from one life to the other is acute'.[395]

How does a perpetual state of interruption alter the way mothers think? Standing adrift in the supermarket aisle, Offill feels 'feebleminded' and forgetful; when her daughter asks, '"Why can't we go?",' Offill replies, '"Just wait. Let me think for a minute. You're not letting me think"'.[396] In another passage, she recalls running into a former work acquaintance who expresses confusion upon learning that she failed to produce a second book. The undertone of the conversation is that she surrendered her identity as a full-time writer in order to become a full-time mother. Offill wonders longingly about the 'road not taken': 'My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster instead. Women almost never become art monsters because art monsters only concern themselves with art, never mundane things.'[397] The implication here is that the domestic is incompatible with the autonomy of the creative mind. The art monster is uncontaminated by the infringements on time, space, and the ruminative mind, that the demands of the child poses. Because of loss of spare time, the paradox of days that 'felt long but there was nothing expansive about them', and a blockage on reflective thought, the mother cannot also be the art monster.[398] The kind of thinking that was possible before her daughter was born is only possibly during the brief moments when the baby sleeps, during which, 'a tiny space would clear in my head and I could think again'.[399] The brief moments described by Cusk and Offill reflect periods during which a space can re-open in their minds, yet it is a tenuous freedom waiting to be interrupted, and a time in which the mother may find herself ambivalently willing the baby back to her. Attempting to return to work while a baby-sitter cares for her daughter, Cusk realises that her 'reunion with freedom, so longed for, was panicky and unsatisfactory', the separation feels 'brutal'.[400] Cusk suggests that this is a fundamental paradox of motherhood, that the child has 'jurisdiction of her consciousness': 'When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself; and so it is as difficult to leave your children as it is to stay with them.'[401] Even during moments of respite, interruption is always anticipated and the psychic attachment to the child produces a situation in which the mother is psychologically interrupted by the child despite the separation.

---

[394] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 45.
[395] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 65.
[396] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* pp. 49-50.
[397] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 8.
[398] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 25.
[399] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 28.
[400] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 151.
[401] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 7.

Baraitser suggests that out of all the interruptions in the mother's life 'the most disturbing is the interruption in one's capacity to think; to follow through a thought, reflect or dwell in thought, or gather one's thoughts.'[402] After the birth of her child, Manguso 'had no thoughts, no self-awareness, just an ability to sit with a little creature who screamed and screamed'.[403] The writer who, perhaps more than most, relies upon an ability to think reflectively loses a vital component of their subjectivity during the relentless waves of interruption. After a day spent alone with her daughter, Offill tries to 'craft an anecdote' for her husband 'out of nothing'.[404] For Offill, there is a lack of variation in her everyday routine; the days with the baby felt long and 'cut up into little scraps', filled with a repeated series of tasks 'that had the peculiar quality of seeming both urgent and tedious'.[405] If we are partly temporal beings, as Baraitser suggests, then repeated temporal interruption would have a profound effect on our subjective experience and way of thinking.[406] Manguso's text is consumed with inquiries into her temporal shift; she terms the temporality of motherhood, ongoingness: 'an enforced momentum forbidding contemplation'.[407] Manguso wonders whether it is 'possible to truly observe one's child, as a writer must, while also simultaneously loving him? Does a mother have something like writer's block - *perceiver's block?*'.[408]

Beyond the everyday experience of impairment, Baraitser claims that the interruption into the mother's way of thinking and operating on a daily and sustained level does not just have the power to obstruct but also to create new possibilities for the mother. The nature of an interruption, that produces a space or break in whatever has been the subject of the rupture, is that the gap created must be filled with something different and unfamiliar. The repeated interruption, which Baraitser argues structures maternal subjectivity, 'can be experienced as depleting, exhausting, disabling and controlling, but also seems to have the potential to be an enlivening and productive encounter, one that forces the mother to access a kind of thinking and feeling outside of her usual repertoire, pushes her to a state of being 'beside herself''.[409] Baraitser understands the potential of maternal interruption through David Appelbaum's philosophy of positive disruption, in which subjects may discover consciousness through their encounter with the break or 'blank'. In this moment, we may become aware of the 'shadow of thinking itself' and discover an "eruption of being" .[410] For the mother, it allows her 'to stop 'trying to get back' to what she was saying, thinking, remembering,

---

[402] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 73
[403] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 55.
[404] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 27.
[405] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* pp. 25-26.
[406] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 74
[407] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 72.
[408] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 72.
[409] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 75
[410] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 79

doing, and to recuperate some of this experience as a new way of thinking.'[411] Manguso discovers a different way of thinking and has an altered approach to the world around her and her position within it. The lifelong anxiety she felt before the birth of her son disappears: 'The time I spent sitting and nursing and holding the baby and cleaning up his messes could have borne the worry from me as completely as I bore the baby, which in my experience marked a change of mind that by now seems permanent.'[412] It is clear that the repeated forced breaks in the normal temporality of her pre-maternal life have provoked a shift in her subjective experience. Alongside the incessant interruption of her child's cries, Offill describes occasions of bodily closeness to her infant daughter that also suspend the moment: 'But the smell of her hair. The way she clasped her hand around my fingers. This was like medicine. For once, I didn't have to think. The animal was ascendant.'[413] There is a freedom for the mind in these moments; Baraitser notes that during these times of arrested thought for the mother, 'a more 'organic apprehension of the present moment' is made available – those intense moments of pleasure or connectedness that mothers report, moments that may paradoxically allow access to a somatic or sensory mode of experiencing which may have been unavailable previously'.[414]

Splitting of Pregnant Consciousness

Julia Kristeva proposes that pregnancy is experienced 'as the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and another; of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech'.[415] The mother begins to notice the burgeoning and multiplying of her body progressively during her developing pregnancy. Nelson senses the strange bodily movements of the fetus taking place within her, the 'way the baby literally *makes space* where there wasn't space before [...] [t]he *capaciousness* of growing a baby [...] The cartilage nub where my ribs used to fit together at the sternum'.[416] The growing baby is reorganising Nelson's organs and adjusting the organisation of her skeleton, a physiological shift that reflects and precedes the psychological change for the mother; of being no longer singular but not yet clearly demarcated as doubled. In her work on pregnant embodiment, Iris Marion Young suggests that the 'first movements of the fetus produce this sense of the splitting subject; the fetus's movements are wholly mine, completely within me, conditioning my experience and space. Only I have access to these movements from their origin [...] I have a privileged relation to this other life, not unlike that

---

[411] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 79
[412] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 84.
[413] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 26.
[414] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 80.
[415] Julia Kristeva, 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini', in *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 242.
[416] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 128.

which I have to my dreams and thoughts'.[417] The growing fetus is somatically linked to the mother but its development and movement remain mysterious even to her: 'Powerless, finitude, endurance. You are making the baby, but not *directly*. You are responsible for his welfare, but unable to control the core elements. You must allow him to unfurl, you must feed his unfurling, you must hold him.'[418] For Nelson, the advent of pregnancy is an introduction to the maternal paradox of responsibility and powerlessness; the intimate relation alongside a feeling of expanse between the woman and the fetus in utero.

For Cusk, the propulsion of pregnancy feels akin to a colonisation of her body, mind, and subjectivity. The descriptions of her pregnant body are overwhelmingly negative: the idea of 'getting in touch' with her growing baby is 'as useful as a field getting in touch with the motorway being built through it'.[419] She repeatedly refers to the 'intense claustrophobia' of her pregnant body as a site of imprisonment, as a threat to personal freedom and solitude. In Cusk's eyes, the baby has already begun threatening to obliterate her autonomous selfhood. Maternity, 'for Cusk, is disfigurement: the loss of form and cohesion proper to the subject, a chaotic scrambling of body parts, with a hole in the head where intelligence formerly had its seat'.[420] Cusk is suspicious about the external, public view of her pregnant body, in which the fetus plays both victim and autocrat; a creature whom she must protect from the outside world, and yet somebody who persecutes and depletes her. Despite the repeated images of imprisonment, Cusk feels a solidarity with the baby and a need to protect it from an intrusive outside world. During her sonograph examination the technician is figured as a tyrant, who attempts to cajole, with Cusk as a less willing participant, a worthy performance from the baby: 'Come on, the sonographer urges the creature harshly, let's see you move!'.[421] In this description, the mother and baby are together in their shared persecution by an invasive medical field.

Overwhelmed by the homogeneity of modern pregnancy propaganda, Cusk is keenly aware that it is not the baby who exerts 'this watchful pressure: it is the baby's meaning for other people, the world's sense of ownership stating its claim'.[422] The pregnant body becomes public property, a precious container for future children, and the pregnant mother must be seen to conform to a uniform procession from inception to birth and beyond. Despite the overwhelming uniformity of cultural discourse on pregnancy, Nelson questions whether 'there is something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's "normal" state, and occasions a radical intimacy with – and radical alienation – one's body? How can an experience so profoundly strange

---

[417] Young, p. 50.
[418] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 114.
[419] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 29.
[420] Stone, p. 15.
[421] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 24.
[422] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 24, p. 35.

and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity?'.[423] Nelson acknowledges the paradoxical experience of pregnancy, in which one may feel simultaneously heteronormative, acquiescing to the social responsibility of reproduction, and alienated from public spaces for the 'smug autoeroticism' and obscenity of the pregnant body. The pregnant body in public is accepted on certain terms, as a 'pregnant, cutout doll': on public transport, passengers jump to lift Nelson's bags and service personnal salute her, but in the university environment she is dismissed as 'that wild oxymoron, *the pregnant woman who thinks*'.[424] Nelson writes of a mug given to her by her mother, which depicts a family photograph at Christmas in which Nelson is seven months pregnant. She wonders what might be essentially heteronormative about this mug, perhaps that

> we're clearly participating, or acquiescing into participating, in a long tradition of families being photographed at holiday time in their holiday best? [...] What about my pregnancy – is that inherently heteronormative? Or is the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation (or, to put a finer edge on it, maternity) more a reactionary embrace of how things have shaken down for queers than the mark of some ontological truth?[425]

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has referred to Christmas as an occasion exemplifying heteronormativity, 'a time when all institutions are speaking with one voice,' and the procreative family unit is at the centre.[426] One understanding of queer is that it refers to those existing in excess of or outside the realm of heteronormativity, therefore Nelson's pregnant body, within the seemingly heteronormative family scene on the mug, should not be counted as queer. Nelson refers to Lee Edelman, who argues that "*queerness* names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism"'.[427] This is an element of the push against homonormativity, against queer being undermined by normative reproduction, but Nelson works beyond this dichotomy.

Through *The Argonauts,* Nelson puts forth an argument for an understanding of queer as more expansive, in line with Sedgwick's working of queer, 'to hold all kinds of resistances and fracturings and mismatches that have little or nothing to do with sexual orientation'.[428] Nelson finds pregnancy an alienating and dislocating experience, both in terms of the body in public space and imagination, and the somatic and psychical disturbance it causes within her. Therefore, in the

---

[423] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 16.
[424] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 113.
[425] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* pp. 15-16.
[426] Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 5.
[427] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 94.
[428] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 35.

way that it radically alters and distorts, pregnancy can be understood as queer. As Young states of her pregnancy, 'the boundaries of my body are themselves in flux. [...] I literally do not have a firm sense of where my body ends and the world begins'.[429] The pregnant body is constantly in a state of becoming, the developing fetus continually makes the female body a stranger to itself and puts the woman in a constant state of being beside herself. In this sense, the pregnant woman's body is characteristically queer, in its definition as a continuing moment and movement; a site of permanent becoming. Of her altered, outsider relationship to her body, Nelson recalls the sense that her breasts 'feel like they belong to somebody else,' that *'I gave my body to my baby.* I'm not sure I want it back, or in what sense I could ever have it'.[430] Through pregnancy and motherhood, Nelson's body has become queer, in that it was once experienced as one, then as a strange, ambiguous doubledness, and finally, as a body 'in pieces'.

There is an ongoing conflict between body and intellect for the pregnant woman in public: delivering a talk at a university, Nelson feels as if her pregnant body becomes the leading impression for the audience. She is acutely aware of her uncertain duality, as 'if when I myself see pregnant women in the public sphere, there isn't a kind of drumming in my mind that threatens to drown out all else: *pregnant, pregnant, pregnant,* perhaps because the soul (or souls) in utero is pumping out static, static that disrupts our usual perception of an other as a *single* other. The static of facing not one, but also not two'.[431] The pregnant woman in public is seen primarily as a pregnant body, a container carrying a valuable cargo, a perception which works to obliterate the woman as thinking subject: '*You are holding the future; one must be kind to the future.'*[432] Of herself as an unwelcome, messy, and plural pregnant body in an academic philosophy seminar, Imogen Tyler has written: 'I am not metaphor, but real becoming, perpetually modified. My body, massive pregnant body, wants to stand up, to go to the front of the room, to present itself as a question [...] Can the philosophical body, philosophical bodies, contain, account for, or even imagine a body, a subject, that reproduces others, not metaphorically, but literally?'.[433]

For Cusk, too, pregnancy charts the increasing irrelevance of an autonomous subjectivity in the view of others beyond that of her swollen abdomen, the culmination of which takes place during her Caesarean section. The Caesarean section is a moment in which the female body is literally split in two, its lower half hidden from view behind a curtain and its upper half, with its redundant consciousness, not needed in that moment, drifting above. During the procedure, Cusk feels silenced; all sense of autonomy disappears as she submits her and her daughter to the

---

[429] Young, p. 51.
[430] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 136.
[431] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 141.
[432] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 112.
[433] Imogen Tyler, 'Reframing Pregnant Embodiment', in *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*, ed. by Sara Ahmed, Jane Kilby, Celia Lury, Maureen McNeil and Beverly Skeggs (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 288-302, p. 290.

procedure. Any thought or speech from the pregnant body is now unacknowledged: 'I grow mute and limp with acceptance [...] What's happening? I say [...] I fear suddenly that I have been forgotten [...] Nobody replies to my question. Some transfer of significance has occurred'.[434] Though the birth experience is altogether more positive for Nelson, she repeats the mantra: 'I am going, almost gone [...] I am gone but happy'.[435] As with pregnancy, the woman's consciousness is isolated during the birth; it is an experience only she can endure. Nelson moves into a 'pain cavern', which is dark and solitary. During her labour, everything outside of her body and consciousness is viewed from within the deep cavern, into which she goes ever deeper as the pain progresses. The image of the cavern is a place she returns to often through her memoir. It is a space she inhabits alone; with all the transformative and unfamiliar elements the cavern implies.

Young explains that for 'others the birth of an infant may be only a beginning, but for the birthing woman it is a conclusion'; it is the conclusion of the process of pregnancy along with the intimate relationship with the baby known during this time. The relation with the in-utero child is dialectic and the bond created during this shared process must evolve into a relationship based on altered requirements which must be negotiated. The baby is now separate, but still completely reliant on the mother, as well as other carers, for nurture and survival. The mother must mourn the loss of this symbiosis, as well as, what she suspects is the loss of her pre-maternal identity, to prepare herself for a changed relationship with the baby. The circumstances of the birth influence the experience of this change in the mother substantially: the failure to achieve a natural birth is perceived by Cusk as a disadvantaged beginning to motherhood for both mother and child, a failure on her part to provide her daughter with the best introduction. A sense of failure that has been encouraged by a plethora of pregnancy literature and messages from the medical community during the pregnancy. Cusk senses that she has betrayed the bond with her daughter through this failure: 'The doctors hold the baby up so that I can see her. She is livid and blue and her face is a rictus of shock and fear. I recognise her immediately from the scan. Only I know the secret of her tranquillity, the floating world of her gestation [...] Her father takes her and holds her. His offers of friendship must suffice, must compensate for her lack of proper passage'.[436] This is the setting for the mother and child's first introduction to one another outside the cohabitation of pregnancy, and the moment of recognition is immediately tinged with guilt and inadequacy.

Tied into the shift in relationship between mother and new baby from symbiotic to a complex separateness, is a rearrangement of the subjectivity of the mother. Young states that in the moment of birth, the mother 'fears the loss of identity, as though on the other side of the birth she herself became a transformed person, such that she would "never be the same again"'.[437] The deathly

---

[434] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* pp. 40-42.
[435] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 156, p. 165.
[436] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* pp. 42-43.
[437] Young, p. 55.

connotations used by the writers about the experience of childbirth suggest multiple meanings, but as Young has argued, it can be linked to the perception of the birth as the end of many things for the mother as well as the start of others. Laying supine on the operating table, Cusk feels that her 'voice sounds preternatural coming out of my dead body [...] I feel as if I am at the end of my life'.[438] The 'death' of Cusk as her daughter is born is a culmination of the decline of the clarity of her self and body during the pregnancy. Nelson wonders whether delivering a baby is like 'touching-death,' a process that demands 'surrender' of the body as well as the self. It can be no coincidence that both Nelson and Manguso choose to parallel the birth of their children with the death of their respective mothers-in-law. Through the act of childbirth women re-encounter their own beginnings and their own mothers, realising that they too were brought forth in this manner. The powerlessness during the force of labour and the return to pure corporeality reawakens memories of the mother's own infancy, and so the labour is felt to be a kind of rebirth in which the labouring woman recalls her own blankness and vulnerability. In childbirth the mother remembers a time *she* was in this liminal space and time between existence and non-existence.[439]

This re-birth of sorts may provoke a crisis of the self and a sense that one must remake oneself. In the days following her son's birth, Baraitser is '*unsteady, dizzy,'* as if she were relearning to walk: '*I don't know myself. Severed from myself, like the cut end of a worm. I am disorganized, stunned.*'[440] Returning to her house with her baby daughter, it is as if Cusk has 'come to the house of someone who has just died,' she realises that all the household objects are familiar but she has become estranged from herself and thus everything around her takes on a foreign quality.[441] It is during the initial adjustments after the birth that the mother must begin to further negotiate the splitting, begun in pregnancy, and to comprehend the child who immediately begins to feel distant and lost to the mother. Cusk senses that while she left home 'one,' she has come back as 'a couple, a pair'.[442] Yet, mother and daughter 'are still so close to our sundering that neither of us seems entire: the painful stump of our jointness, livid and fresh, remains'.[443] After the birth, it becomes incumbent upon the mother to steer the baby in the direction of complete separateness towards which they should continue to grow. For this task Cusk feels entirely unprepared, experiencing a 'profound bewilderment' at the burden: 'It is as if I am unable to find any connection between my physical implication in the fact of her existence, and the emotional world I had imagined would automatically accompany it.'[444] Part of the feelings of remoteness and anxiety are a result of the detached transition into motherhood for mother and daughter: the

---

[438] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* pp. 41-42.
[439] Alison Stone investigates this phenomenon further in her chapter on 'Maternal Time' in *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectiviity*.
[440] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 49
[441] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 50.
[442] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 50.
[443] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 51.
[444] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 53.

Caesarean section in which a crude third subject (surgeon) was introduced into the birthing pair. Alongside these feelings, Cusk has sensed an insidious cultural communication suggesting that these are not suitable maternal emotions following labour, further alienating her from the experience. It is at this emotional point of inadequacy and rupture, with her subjectivity blown apart, that Cusk must embark upon her career of motherhood.

Fragmentation of Self

For Cusk, the practice of mothering signals an ongoing oppression of self, in which the 'unified, capable' self of pre-maternity must compete for space and which is ultimately pushed aside by the emerging mother. She 'seems to endorse a problematic individualism as the memoir explicitly embraces the notion of a self that pre-exists motherhood and is now lost: the mind and prior self suppressed by the urgencies of body and baby'.[445] For Cusk, there are various insidious cultural messages pertaining to the incompatibility of different female subjectivities; the widespread moral expectation is that the mother should be the most important of women's identities. As Juhasz points out, for most mothers, 'due to the cultural ideology of motherhood, this plethora of subject positions can be especially difficult to maintain, because the cultural consensus, usually well internalized by individual women, is that there is only one identity: Mother'.[446] The title of the chapter 'Motherbaby' alludes to the belief that mother and new-born baby should, in fact, be referred to as a singular being; a state of being that while she cannot deny experiencing, Cusk finds 'unnerving' and 'threatening'.[447] After birth the possession of the mother's body continues; as its structure was altered during pregnancy, the breastfeeding mother's shape is shrunken and changed by the suckling baby. During feeds that last for hours, Cusk can 'imagine [her] solidity transferring itself to [her daughter], leaving [her] unbodied, a mere force, a miasma of nurture that surrounds [her daughter] like a halo'.[448] The maternal body's ability to nurture the new-born baby dominates the mother's perception of herself during early motherhood. From the beginning, Cusk struggles with breastfeeding, leading her to conclude that the 'motherbaby' unit is poisoned by her intrusive feelings of ambivalence. For Cusk, the female self, defined by its independence and intellect, is irretrievable and has been replaced by an inert body. As if infiltrated by an alien force, the 'slow-moving bulk of the motherbaby wanders the fragile rooms, as brainless and clumsy as a dinosaur [...] I cohabit uneasily with myself, with the person I was before [...] [h]er self-involvement, her vulnerability alarm me [...] my existence revolves covertly around the secret of my daughter [...] I

[445] Frye, p. 196.
[446] Juhasz, p. 405.
[447] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 93.
[448] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 98.

don't care about myself, I say. I have no subjectivity'.[449] The mother and self become incompatible identities; to 'succeed in being one means to fail at being the other. The break between mother and self was less clean than I had imagined [...] I never feel myself to have progressed beyond this division. I merely learn to legislate for two states'.[450] The ethical responsibility to care for the child presents itself as more immediately demanding and therefore the incompatible parts of the self – the solitary pursuit of writing and reading, socialising, professional life - must be relegated to being practiced away from the baby. Cusk's early experiences of mothering suggest that there is an 'earlier independent, solitary, unitary self that must yield to a more fluid self capable of bearing a much more porous relation to another.'[451] In this understanding of female subjectivity, the autonomous, impermeable self, which retroactively is perceived as masculine, must be relinquished and mourned.[452] For even in moments of freedom from demanding maternal care, whether they are unsuccessful trips to the theatre without the baby or interludes of time when the baby sleeps, Cusk feels the pull back towards the baby and can never fully regain the identification with her pre-maternal self.

Baraitser suggests that motherhood is seen as 'a condition in which the self budges up to make room for another, and is radically changed in the process. The self undergoes a fundamental transformation of state; from something solid, unified, singular, to something messy, interdependent, and altogether more blurred.'[453] In her work, Baraitser chooses to complicate the idea of the existence of a 'solid, unified, singular' pre-maternal feminine subjectivity, instead, working through the psychoanalytic concept that women are 'subjects-on-trial,' always in the process of becoming. The work does not deny the significant psychic crisis brought on by motherhood but does seek to reconsider previous feminist and psychoanalytical work on motherhood which has often failed to explore the full complexity of maternal ontological transformations. It is my contention that the primary texts referred to in this chapter share the aim of complicating assumptions of unity and fluidity, as they peer between the cracks of fractured maternal subjectivity.

In Nelson's understanding of the encounter with the child, a mother 'must be willing to go to pieces,' to see parts of herself detached from their usual moorings. Likewise, through motherhood, Cusk's face becomes 'unrecognisable'; it is a metaphor to which she often returns, in order to describe her disordered subjectivity and sense of obliterated pre-maternal self.[454] During the early days of motherhood, Cusk finds herself 'standing in front of the mirror striving to recognise' herself as she attempts to reconnect to the self deemed to have been lost in the process of

---

[449] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 97.
[450] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 57.
[451] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 49
[452] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 50
[453] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounter,* pp. 49-50
[454] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 65, p. 79, p. 178.

motherhood.[455] Learning to be a mother has 'wrought' Cusk from the past perception of herself: 'my affection, my silly entertainments, my doting hours, the particular self I tried to bring to my care of her [...] All that is required is for me to be there; an 'all' that is of course everything, because being there involves not being anywhere else [...] Being myself is no compensation for not being there. And accordingly, the whole peopled surface, the whole occupation of my life has been swept away by her cries'.[456] The pre-maternal self is incompatible with the practice of motherhood and therefore they enter into competition with each other. The attributes that enabled the prior sense of being a single, unified subject 'are felt to be under threat, compromised, or recoverable only with difficulty and at the expense of other, newly acquired dimensions of life as a mother'.[457] The mother struggles to reconcile her multiple subjectivities, the aspects of herself that are often conflictual and discordant. As Juhasz states, maternal subjectivity 'demands the negotiation of multiple states of being, or subject positions, that may seem dramatically different from one another and are often experienced as contradictory. A mother is simultaneously, a mother and a daughter; a mother and a (social) woman; a fantasy Mother and an everyday mother; a body and mind originally connected to but now separate from another person'.[458] Juhasz continues to explain that the inherent multiplicity of the mothering process can lead to feelings of ambivalence and fragmentation within the mother, as she struggles to 'split off' or repress certain selves deemed incompatible with motherhood. Cusk describes this ongoing struggle as small 'daggers of pain,' writing that 'I cohabit uneasily with myself, with the person I was before. I look at this person's clothes, her things. I go through her memories, like an imposter, prurient and faintly scandalised. Her self-involvement, her emotional vulnerability alarm me [...] Love, expectation, anger and resentments flow' through me.[459] In this passage, Cusk experiences her pre-maternal self as 'split off' and outside of the realm of her current existence. Juhasz interprets the sensation of splitting as an unconscious defence when 'comfort from ambivalence is sought'; an exhausting process in which mothers, in effect, 'keep secrets from themselves'.[460] Kraemer suggests that it is not enough to allow the mother her ambivalence and fragmentation, we must work to understand how these states are experienced by the mother, to 'make sense of and communicate her multiple and shifting subjective experiences'. A patient of Kraemer's recalls that '"I was not the same, and I am still living out the differences. It is difficult to say what those were precisely, but they are bone deep"'.[461]

---

[455] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 65.
[456] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* pp. 70-71.
[457] Stone, p. 15.
[458] Juhasz, p. 398.
[459] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 97.
[460] Juhasz, p. 406.
[461] Kraemer, p. 788.

Maternal Alterity

One of the first things a parent does in their encounter with their child is to give the child a name. In Baraitser's own experience, the act of conferring a name on her son '*both claims him as my child, and places him elsewhere, given over already to the order of language.* [...] *he is simultaneously mine and displaced, same and strange.*'[462] Later, her son, Joel, begins to call Baraitser by her first name, an '*uncanny'* sensation that renews the '*strangeness'* between them as well as herself as a stranger. Offill remembers the illicit sensation of saying the word daughter to a stranger: '"It's for my daughter," I said. My heart was beating too fast, as if I might get arrested.'[463] Nursing her daughter in the middle of the night they are like strangers, as 'she'd stare at me with a stunned, shipwrecked look as if my body were the island she'd washed up on'.[464] At once, to the mother, the baby is felt to be the unknowable other, whose cries and mysterious expressions must be deciphered, and as one who is instantly recognisable as somebody who was once part of her. It is a searching dialogue, illustrated by Cusk by what is transferred in the gaze between mother and child. Cusk is unsettled as she wakes to find her daughter 'staring at me again in the dark ... her expression has changed, has acquired a layer of depth [...] I find something eerie in it, as if the baby were absorbing information from me at high speed while I slept'.[465] Cusk's comparison of her baby to an alien species in this passage suggests an inherent uncanniness and unknowability between them, yet there are profound instances of recognition alongside. In a moment that echoes the recognition between them the first time they locked eyes, Cusk recalls when they would nap together and her daughter's 'eyes fixed in fascination on my body [...] I could feel us falling together through the bright constellations of our thoughts. Even as I crossed the line into sleep I felt her cross it too'.[466] In this instant, they become interstellar beings together, detached from the rest of the world in their connectedness.

Baraitser interprets maternal subjectivity as emerging through particular relations with a transcendent alterity, as the mother is pushed outside her normal range of consciousness. In her work on maternal alterity, Baraitser evokes Emmanuel Levinas' paternal function in ethical relations, reinterpreting it as the mother's ethical responsibility to the child. This is in order to argue for the mother's relation to her *own* alterity: a relation to herself made strange, without losing

[462] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 24
[463] Offil, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 23.
[464] Offil, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 23.
[465] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 53.
[466] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 108.

either herself or the child. In this understanding, the ethical response by the mother towards the child causes her to transcend herself and potentially be returned to herself anew. The child has the power to transform the mother into a state of openness; the discomfort of naming the unknown other/child 'holds open the status of she who names'.[467] The relationship with the child opens up a set of ethical relations with the

> radically Other (an otherness made temporarily tangible by that whiff of embarrassment as the mother confers a name on this stranger with no name, in the gap before the name 'sticks'), an encounter with what is fundamentally strange, as well as being the same, that establishes this relationship as ethical, and hence as one in which we can begin to talk of the emergence of subjectivity. In recognizing the child as a stranger, as distinct, the mother also recognizes what is distinct about herself.[468]

The encounter with the child acts to push the mother outside herself, making her a stranger to herself and compelling a reconfiguration of her subjectivity: 'It is to do with facing what is beyond one's own possibilities, but recognizing this beyondness [...] as also part of one's own possibilities'.[469] Through this understanding, we may begin to imagine maternal alterity as a productive experience which forces reconsiderations of the self.

Offil's text is an ode to the mother as astronaut; her prose is littered with references to the cosmos and to space explorers, from her ghost-writing work with the 'almost' astronaut to the facts and anecdotes dedicated to outer space. With her husband, they agree that as parents they are 'living like astronauts,' adrift from the ordinary population as they gaze down at earth from an altered vantage point. Offill refers to the 'Golden Record' project, a collection of sounds and music 'thrown into outer space' in 1976. Amongst the collection of sounds is that of '*Kiss, Mother and Child,'* the intimate gesture existing forever in isolation in the unknown realms of the cosmos.[470] The mother as astronaut metaphor serves many functions: it points to the loneliness and isolation of both endeavours, the mother and child spinning on their own axis on a far-flung planet; the mundanity of the repeated tasks alongside the knowledge of its epic enterprise; and the possibility of total obliteration of self. For understanding the mother and child relationship, and its consequences for the mother, it is perhaps most beneficial to consider the altered vantage point inferred by the space metaphor. It not only suggests an alienation from normality but also the potential for new formulations of the self to emerge from the divergent positioning and point of view. Offill has stated that the image of astronauts illustrates 'how my own life had become

---

[467] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 25
[468] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 46.
[469] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 43.
[470] Offil, *Dept. of Specualtion,* p. 84.

unrecognizable to me': the way astronauts are supposed to fill their day with mundane tasks to avoid the realization that they 'are in outer space, thousands of miles from other human beings. I compare motherhood to that, because it's the same thing – you're not supposed to look around and say I don't recognise where I am'.[471] This otherworldliness, illustrated by Offill through her and the child's remote existence in the cosmos, can be read as maternal alterity. Baraitser implies that 'in the early weeks after giving birth, the parent and child' remain in a 'kind of 'confinement', theoretically cocooned from other-worldliness'.[472]

The sensation of otherworldliness and preternaturality is present in Cusk's early notions of motherhood too. As she describes the moment of her daughter's birth simultaneously as her own metaphorical death, Cusk herself is borne from the 'real' world into a shadowy doubled existence. After the birth, she returns as a spectre to her former life, her home is familiar but remote, everything is somehow changed. In the thick of early motherhood, Cusk ventures out to buy a childcare manual, which are 'situated at the far end of recorded experience, just past diet books and just before astrology'.[473] The more she delves into the books, the further her daughter recedes from her into an unknown world that must be learned by the mother. The books begin with a sort of apocalyptic scenario 'in which the world we know has vanished, replaced by another'; 'The vanished world is the mother's own. It is the world of her childhood, and her own mother was its last living inhabitant.'[474] In Cusk's experience, motherhood is akin to inhabiting another country or dimension; you may return to the 'vanished world' one day but that world, which was once your home, may feel alien. Later in her motherhood, as she wanders alone around Oxford Street, attempting to buy clothes to make up for two years away from the fashion that was once a component of her identity, everything seems 'weirdly futuristic,' as if she were an anthropologist returning from a long field trip.[475] During the shopping trip she feels detached and purposeless: 'I have the curious feeling that I no longer exist in synchronicity with time, but at a certain delay, like someone at the end of a transatlantic phone call.'[476] The temporal rupture of early motherhood has begun to feel permanent and the sense of alterity continues; in the store, Cusk is without her daughter, but still the psychic link lingers. Standing alone the feeling of anxiety at being separated from her daughter rises: 'I long for my child, long for her as a sort of double, a tiny pilot boat winging young and certain up the channel ahead of me, guiding the blind, clumsy weight of me through. I go to the children's section of a department store and stand there amidst the cribs and the

---

[471] Jenny Offill, interviewed by Ceridwen Morris, *The Literary Review*, <http://www.theliteraryreview.org/interview/literary-mothers-a-conversation-book-list/> [accessed 17 August 2019]

[472] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 156.
[473] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 111.
[474] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 111.
[475] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 210.
[476] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* pp. 210-211.

baby clothes, the teddy bears and tiny shoes, and I feel alleviated, rescued, plugged into a source of life.'[477] Her daughter, once experienced as self obliterating and overwhelming to the point of exhaustion has a dual presence as sustaining; motherhood has wrought a change in Cusk's sense of being in the world and being herself.

The quality of alterity is shared between the mother and child during early motherhood: the mother is estranged from the outside world yet often feels a detachment from the baby itself. For Offill's maternal protagonist, her sense of knowing her daughter is constantly broken as the relationship is perpetually reconfigured and the child is remade as a stranger to the mother: '"Do you know why I love you?" my daughter asks me. [...] "Because I am your mother," she tells me'.[478] In this sense, the mother is displaced from her footing and is reimagined as a stranger to herself. As Baraitser argues, something came 'back from the relation with the child that was an experience of one's own strangeness, distinctness, particularity and strangeness-to-oneself; an experience, that is, of alterity that does not negate the subject'.[479] Baraitser evokes Judith Butler's formation of the self, that to become a self 'is to be outside oneself, or 'other' than oneself, and to have always already lost oneself through a relation to the Other that returns one to oneself as different – as other'.[480] Therefore, the act of becoming a subject is always undertaken in conjunction with an Other, and the self returned from the relation to the Other is a stranger to the self.

Like the child, the maternal subject is not static but always in process. Through her text, Manguso slowly recognises her ongoingness as a way of being that will not pass; in one of the text's symbolic dreams she recalls that 'an old woman told me that at my age, she wished she'd known that *the soul never stops appearing*'.[481] If we are to understand the subject as constantly in the process of becoming, or in Kristeva's wording 'on trial', then the maternal subject becomes the 'subject-in-process/on-trial par excellence.'[482] Baraitser surmises that 'to be a subject-in-process is to be an ethical subject, but with the understanding that 'ethical' here describes an ethics that emerges out of practice, out of a temporary and provisional relation between subject and other that is constantly being reconfigured.'[483] The ethical relationship with the child requires the mother's subjectivity to constantly evolve in response to everyday maternal practice and a need to accommodate the growing subjectivity of the child. The ongoing development of the changing infant means that, just as the mother feels a sense of connectedness to the 'open structure' of the child through practices such as breastfeeding, she will be cast outside again as the infant remains

---

[477] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 211.
[478] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 54.
[479] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 155.
[480] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 35
[481] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 59.
[482] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 101
[483] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 101

essentially unknowable. The maternal encounter is marked by a revolving process of connection and disconnection, as the mother must tolerate the ambivalent sensations associated with the perpetual flow towards and away from the child. The mother discovers the full spectrum of emotions that encountering the child arouses, those of love and hate, anger and tenderness, fleeting frustration and contentment, in their most intense form. As the mother sees violent emotions in her child, strong sensations are awoken in the mother too. Kraemer recalls a time during her own mothering in which she decided to let her child 'cry it out,' that 'the experience of hearing her screams not only filled me with anguish, it also evoked in me a painful mix of anger, despair, and more disturbingly, pleasure'.[484] Weathering the torrent of infantile emotions presents an exceptional challenge to the mother's subjectivity; Kraemer later adds that, clearly, 'the mother's "claiming of her subjectivity" while sensitively adapting to her baby demands an extraordinary degree of emotional and psychic flexibility'.[485]

The experience of being with the developing child means that the mother's subjectivity can never be fixed, even as they must present a firm bedrock for their child's growth. The mother's subjectivity is dictated by its adaptability to the shifting other, as it is repeatedly pushed beyond itself. As the child shows the first signs of wilful separation from the mother it produces new sensations in the mother which awaken her to the knowledge that she desires an ambivalent oneness with the child that may never be satisfied. 'My daughter has realised that I am different from her,' Cusk apprehends, as her daughter's behaviour begins to shift away from her.[486] The increasing separation initiated by her daughter provokes a change in Cusk's thinking; there is an internal renegotiation of the mother and child interrelationship as she submits that we 'are an admixture, an experiment. I don't yet know what effect her presence will have on my life, but its claim is more profound, more unnerving than was the mere work of looking after her'.[487] Offill, too, faces a feeling of rejection by her daughter, a moment illustrated by her daughter protesting '*Stop writing I love you'* in her school lunch box.[488] Her daughter writes this message over the top of the note Offill had left, an attempt to redirect the narrative of their relationship, and an illustration of the constant fluctuation of need and desire. During these painful moments of renegotiation, Cusk recognises that 'I needed to be her mother more than she needed my mothering [...] I see my daughter hurrying away from me, hurtling towards her future, and in that sight I recognise my ending, my frontier, the boundary of my life'.[489] For Offill, it 'is a feeling from a long time ago, the feeling of someone breaking up with me suddenly [...] I feel odd, strangely light-

[484] Kraemer, p. 784.
[485] Kraemer, p. 785.
[486] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 209.
[487] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 209.
[488] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 92.
[489] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* pp. 205-206.

headed'.[490] The sudden realisation of the child's power to wound and upend the mother prompts in the mother a recognition of their need to please the child. As Baraitser suggests, it is a demonstration of maternal love which leaves the mother abjected: '*When a child's truthfulness is cruel beyond belief, their need to abject me reverberates in me with such force, that despite my internal protests, despite years of schooled resistance to such abjection, it causes me temporarily to embody this state.*'[491] How, then, does the mother withstand this abjection by the child and right herself before it threatens to overwhelm her subjectivity?

The separation from the child is, to some extent, experienced by the mother as a self-loss, as the child who is both self and other abandons the dyad. Offill's interrupted bond with her daughter creates a raw opening within her psyche in which emotions may be felt more keenly. If the self must shift over to make room for the baby in pregnancy and early motherhood, what gaps are left in the maternal subject as the child begins to forge new pathways away from the mother? Nelson muses over the dialogue of love and desire between mother and child: 'It isn't *like* a love affair. It *is* a love affair. Or, rather, it is romantic, erotic, and consuming – but without tentacles. I have my baby, and my baby has me. It is a buoyant eros, an eros without teleology.'[492] The love and desire for the child is made dynamic by the nature of the child's movement; it is a love that must be continually comprehended and an 'affair [that] will likely become unrequited'.[493] Kraemer contends that, if the mother may be thought of as the container for the child's fluctuating demands and emotions, the mother herself will experience 'any number of multiple and oscillating self-states: she may feel enriched or drained, filled or crowded, expanded or obliterated, empowered or commandeered, eager or barely tolerant, receptive or trapped, attuned or bombarded, welcoming or rejecting, and so on'.[494] It is likely that these emotional states will be layered and confusing, and the mother may resent the extent to which they are dictated by the child's at times bewildering whims. In this sense, as Nelson says, the mother and child behave like lovers, with all the intense feelings of love and desire that this implies. Nelson fears that 'I don't ever want to make the mistake of needing him as much as or more than he needs me. But there's no denying that sometimes, when we sleep together in the dark cavern of the bottom bunk, his brother thrashing around on top, the white noise machine grinding out its fake rain, the green digital clock announcing every hour, Iggy's small body holds mine'.[495] In these moments, Nelson finds her own undoing, recognising the vulnerability in her maternal love. Paraphrasing Butler and supporting Baraitser's deductions, Nelson contends that '[s]ubjectivity is keenly relational, and strange. *We*

---

[490] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 92.
[491] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* pp. 90-91.
[492] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 55.
[493] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 55.
[494] Kraemer, p. 774.
[495] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 55.

are for another, or by virtue of another'.[496] Nelson suggests that her maternal love may not be reductive or destructive but in these times of undoing something like a relational subjectivity may emerge. Repudiating the conjecture of Kaja Silverman, whom she refers to in the text, and who maintains that mothers must suffer the 'enormous cost' of teaching 'the lesson of the "me" and the "not-me" to the child,' Nelson states that 'most worthwhile pleasures on this earth slip between gratifying another and gratifying oneself. Some would call that ethics'.[497]

Maternal Self-Transformation

The link that binds all of these textual experiences of shifting maternal subjectivity is the insertion of a gap or break into the mother's psyche and subjective experience which occasions an altered way of thinking and being. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to examine what kind of transformations are possible in this gap, this state of prolonged alterity. Baraitser is uneasy about the terming of motherhood as transformative, claiming that in feminist thinking there is a 'need to understand maternal subjectivity as a fundamentally changed or transformed state, a state at or beyond the border that we once would have recognised as a self-boundary, and from which we may glimpse ourselves anew.'[498] Transformation, for Baraitser, with its 'magical overtones' suggesting a defined change from one thing to another, tends to ignore the messy, indeterminate process of maternal experience as a 'renewed configuration of self.'[499] Narratives which suggest that motherhood presents 'a fundamental transformation of state; from something solid, unified, singular, to something messy, interdependent, and altogether more blurred' tend to overlook the concept of the subject as always 'in process'.[500] As we have seen from the examination in this section, the evolution of maternal subjectivity cannot be described as a simple passage with clearly demarcated boundaries or states. Arguing for a specific kind of maternal transformation, Baraitser invokes Irigaray's description of woman as 'not multiple, but fluid, an endless 'expansion' that escapes its own definition.'[501] In *Speculum of the Other Woman* Irigaray insists that woman is 'indefinite, in-finite, *form is never complete in her'*; the process of female transformation is 'always unpredictable because they do not work towards the accomplishment of a telos. Which would imply one figure taking over – from – the previous figure and prescribing the next: *one* form arrested, therefore, and becoming *another.*'[502] Irigaray's concept of female transformation seems

[496] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 118.
[497] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* pp. 119-120.
[498] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 52.
[499] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 52.
[500] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* pp. 49-50.
[501] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 58.
[502] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* pp. 57-58.

particularly compelling when considering maternal subjectivity, with its refusal of teleology and blurring between self and other.

The primary texts support this understanding of maternal subjectivity, and subjectivity more fundamentally. For the mothers in the texts, the inherent instability and openness of subjectivity becomes clearer to them in the process of motherhood. In Nelson's narrative, identity is progressively understood as loose and transitional, the dual transformation of herself through motherhood and her partner Harry's course of male hormones and 'top' surgery present a commentary on this process. In the midst of these mimetic changes, Nelson recalls a meal out: 'You pass as a guy; I, as pregnant. Our waiter cheerfully tells us about his family, expresses delight in ours. On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more "male," mine, more and more "female." But that's not how it felt on the inside. On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness'.[503] Harry resists conventional identity markers and has exchanged various names throughout his life; they have always represented markers for who he was at that current stage in his life. Having been adopted as a baby, Nelson says of Harry that 'rather than being from or for *an* other, you felt you came from the whole world, utterly plural'.[504] Nelson explicates the dialogue surrounding gender 'transitioning': how to explain that, 'for some, "transitioning" may mean leaving one gender entirely behind, while for others – like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T – it doesn't? *I'm not on my way anywhere,* Harry sometimes tells inquirers. How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy?'.[505] Conversely, Nelson suggests that it's 'easy to get juiced up about a concept like plurality or multiplicity' but equally important to understand 'finitude'; referring, as the text often does, to Sedgewick, Nelson believes that a discussion of subjectivity must place it as 'more than one, and more than two, but less than infinity'.[506] In this, Nelson argues that it is not enough to permit its multiplicity, we must also examine what we mean when we say that subjectivity is varied or fluid.

The abiding metaphor that Nelson returns to is that of the Argo, as her and Harry become the 'Argonauts' of the title, undergoing transformations together. The metaphor of the Argo is first used to explain Nelson's new love for Harry. Borrowing from Roland Barthes, Nelson states that

> the subject who utters the phrase "I love you" is like "the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name." Just as the *Argo's* parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo*, whenever the lover utters the phrase "I love

[503] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 103.
[504] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 173.
[505] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 65.
[506] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 77.

> you," its meaning must be renewed by each use, as "the very task of love and language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new."[507]

Nelson returns to the idea of the Argo, as an entity whose 'parts may get replaced, but it's still called the *Argo*,' in order to theorise identity and subjectivity.[508] The Argo is merely the name we might give to the sum of moving parts, which may be completely transformed, just as the ship's parts were entirely changed but the name remained the same. Negatively interpreted, the Argo becomes an albatross, an identity marker that defines and limits us, as Nelson argues that, on one hand, it illustrates a limitation of identity, a refusal '*to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but*'.[509] It is a refutation of openness and plurality. Nelson encounters this throughout her pregnancy and motherhood, in response to an ultrasound technician's jibes at Iggy's genitals, Nelson argues: 'Let him stay oblivious – for the first and last time, perhaps – to the task of performing a self for others, to the fact that we develop, even in utero, in response to a flow of projections and reflections ricocheting off us. Eventually, we call this snowball a self (*Argo).*'[510] If we interpret the Argo more positively, the metaphor may grant freedom, used as a 'place-holder' in the way that the term queer can be. For this, Nelson returns to Sedgewick, who 'wanted to make way for *queer* to hold all kinds of resistances and fracturings and mismatches that had little or nothing to do with sexuality. "Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*," she wrote. "Keenly, it is relational, and strange." She wanted the term to be a perpetual place-holder – a nominative, like *Argo,* willing to designate molten or shifting parts'.[511] If we name ourselves queer or an Argo, then we are acknowledging the 'continuing moment' and ongoing 'movement' of our subjectivities. It is an acceptance of being more than one thing at once, of attempting to allow discordant subjectivities and sensations to internally coexist. Like the term queer, the Argo/self is relational: we continually discover ourselves in relation to others, perhaps through the words 'I love you' as Barthes theorises. Maternal subjectivity, with its multiplicity, ambivalences, relationality, and blurred boundaries, is born out of saying 'I love you' to the child/other. As with the Argo, the deep impact of the maternal experience, of love and hate, provokes a reconfiguration of one's parts. As Nelson repeats through the text: to become a mother you must be willing to 'go to pieces.'

Paralleled with Nelson's interpretation of the Argo, Cusk repeatedly returns to the metaphor of the house as maternal subjectivity. She experiences herself as a house, and every change that is wrought upon her by motherhood is illustrated as an alteration in the architecture of the house or a

---

[507] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* pp. 5-6.
[508] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 68.
[509] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 68.
[510] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 118.
[511] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 35.

shift in the way she views it. Referring to the 'motherbaby' unit, Cusk states that 'I feel like a house to which an extension has been added: where once there was a wall, now there is a new room [...] The paint has dried; the joins no longer show'.[512] Cusk senses that the 'architecture of the past' has gone during the throes of early motherhood; if the architecture of her past has not been obliterated, it is in a state of reconfiguration and momentary obscurity for her. The construction of her subjectivity has been wrecked by some 'natural disaster': 'I haunt the ruin of my body, a mournful, restless spirit, and I feel exposed, open to the air, the weather, and to the scrutiny of others [...] I'll be lucky if I ever find the time to make the long journey back to myself, to the old ruin, and hurl a coat of paint over it before the winter of middle age sets in'.[513] Later, when Cusk's daughter has begun to show the initial signs of separation from her mother, Cusk realises 'that I had accepted each stage of her dependence on me as a new and permanent reality, as if I were living in a house whose rooms were being painted and forgot that I had ever had the luxury of their use. First one room and then another is given back to me. Stairs are just stairs again'.[514] As with Nelson's Argo, the house, for Cusk, remains on the same plot of land, despite its extensions or alterations it is the same house, but the way she feels and thinks about it changes as she navigates her maternal subjectivity.

Section II

Maternal Narratives

The experience of motherhood portrayed by the writers discussed in the previous is reflected in the texts that they produce. The writers use the maternal narrative as a way to regain and understand what is distinct about maternal subjectivity, and they do so by choosing a form, register, and composition which is analogous to the experience of the mother. Structurally, the writers employ narrative fragmentation, ellipsis, and a non-linear plot to echo the maternal experience of interruption, repetition, multiplicity, and ambiguous, transitional subjectivity. A text that at first appears disordered or discordant can be understood in terms of a decision by the writer to authentically reproduce the maternal encounter. With support from the writers' statements within the texts and those given in interviews, I will make the case that these writers have found existing literary forms, such as fiction and life-writing, to be inadequate vehicles for the narrative of maternal experience and have therefore created a novel form to suit their narrative. Further to this, I argue that the writers are using literary techniques which are contrary to existing maternal

[512] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 94.
[513] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 134.
[514] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 208.

autobiography or works of fiction that deal with the mother figure. The argument will consider the ways in which these maternal texts fit into existing forms, such as critical autobiography, autofiction, essayistic-nonfiction, and fragmentary writing, but ultimately refuse to conform to a strict formal framework. As I propose that this is an evolving form and a literary project which is inspired by a transitory and ambiguous subjective experience, it would be unfaithful to heedlessly fit it into any one genre.

How can we figure these texts against the historical lack of matrifocal literature as well as within the emerging genre of maternal writing? Much has been written in the past few decades evidencing the absence of the mother figure and the maternal writer in mainstream literature. To a certain extent, this absence has been rectified by an increase in autobiographical texts written by women about their own motherhood, but it is far from a fully developed or canonical genre. The contemporary motherhood memoir, as O'Reilly has stated, has tended to focus on 'the impact of social expectations that women who become mothers will sacrifice their careers and personal interests to devote themselves fully to their families, and the labelling of "bad" mothers on those who do not follow such dictates'.[515] They 'unmask' the mother as a flawed, ambivalent subject, and work against traditional dichotomies of the 'good' selfless, instinctual mother and the 'bad' mother who is judged to be selfish for seeking autonomy and experiencing negative sensations associated with her child. The texts in this chapter do represent a challenge against the traditional absence of the mother's voice and texts like Cusk's refer to the pressure of cultural expectations, but they offer something beyond this: alongside presenting a mother figure and narrative that subverts deep-rooted cultural assumptions about how a mother should feel and behave, they explore a literary form which does not conform to 'standard' writing about domesticity or motherhood.

Joanne S. Frye attempts to explain the reasons behind the historic absence of writing about and by mothers: as mentioned in the texts, writers who are mothers commonly lack the material circumstances required to write, those of time, energy, and freedom from interruption. She notes the 'apparent conflict between the terms – "writing" and "mothering" – so that these two activities [are] still largely perceived to be mutually exclusive'; and the notion, reinforced by certain psychoanalytic perspectives, that mothers are objects and are not subjects or active agents of their own stories.[516] Amongst the relative explosion of popular memoirs written about motherhood in the past two decades many are relegated to 'motherhood' or 'domestic' fiction and not perceived to be part of a wider literary dialogue. Nelson acknowledges the 'sneering' perception that mothering and 'highbrow,' avant-garde forms of art are incompatible, when she cites a '2012 Mother's Day cover article in *The New York Book Review,* which began: "No subject offers a greater opportunity

---

[515] Andrea O'Reilly, *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* (London: SAGE, 2010), p. 97.
[516] Joanne S. Frye, 'Narrating Maternal Subjectivity: Memoirs from Motherhood', in *Textual Mothers, Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures,* ed. Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 187-201, p. 189.

for terrible writing than motherhood. . . .To be fair, writing well about children is tough. You know why? They're not that interesting"'.[517] This quote makes two assumptions: firstly, that intelligent and creative writing about motherhood is unlikely because it is not a compelling or worthwhile topic, and secondly, that writing about motherhood should focus on the child not the mother. The writers of the maternal texts in this chapter dispute these claims by producing literary work that situates maternal subjectivity centrally within a wider ontological dialogue. The writers have backgrounds as novelists, literary critics, academics, and poets, and have formerly applied experimental or unconventional techniques in their pre-maternal writing. Their work on motherhood is informed by these literary approaches, and the narratives seek to understand the maternal experience through the same inquisitive philosophy and vigorous analysis as their previous works.

Experience Informs Form: Fragmentation

I began the first section in this chapter with an investigation into the themes of interruption, repetition, alterity and multiplicity in the subjective experience of the mother. This section will parallel this analysis in order to demonstrate the ways in which writers are using the subjectivities of motherhood to challenge the structure and plot of the maternal texts. Although none of the texts can be characterised as strictly autobiographical, the writers have elsewhere drawn attention to the ways their experiences of becoming mothers encouraged a change in their writing style. In the texts that are produced, the sensations of maternal subjectivity are echoed within the form. By doing this, the writer is essentially creating a piece of prose in which the mother's experience becomes tangible to the reader.

In an interview, Nelson has explained that 'I don't set out to serve any goal of experimentalism or hybridity when I write; that conversation seems to me best left to others after the fact. I can't really think or compose with any other focus beyond finding the right tone and shape for the project at hand – *the form is an extension of the content'* (own emphasis).[518] *The Argonauts* is looping and non-linear; Nelson uses breaks and elisions to construct a narrative which leaps between chronologies, creating a sensation of disordered temporality and plot. The prose is presented in fragments, as short paragraphs or a single sentence separated by a gap on the page; the use of the fragment 'disrupts narrative trajectories, in its 'fissures and parataxis [it] asks readers to stitch the fragments together, to hold them apart'.[519] The fragmented form punctuates and interrupts

[517] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 88.
[518] Maggie Nelson, interviewed by Adam Fitzgerald, *LitHub*, (5 May 2015) <https://lithub.com/the-argonauts-diary-theory-poem-memoir/> [accessed 15 August 2019]
[519] Robin Silbergleid, 'In Pieces: Fragmentary on Queer Mother Memoirs and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*', Genders, 1.2 (2016), <https://www.colorado.edu/genders/2017/04/19/pieces-fragmentary-

flow, it has a jarring effect on the reader, forcing them to work harder to decipher chronology. Monica B. Pearl suggests that Nelson's choice to 'skip around' from one thought and story to another, is the prose equivalent of the 'way one might turn one's attention to different eventualities and possibilities (and impossibilities) in a day'.[520] Through this reading, the arrangement of the text imitates maternal subjectivity; it evokes Baraitser's statement that the child's '*cry pulls me out of whatever I was embedded in, and before I have a chance to re-equilibrate. It pulls me out again*'.[521] Nelson is inserting her reader into the '*pitilessness of the present tense,'* compelling the reader to navigate the same temporal and psychic interruptions encountered during motherhood; the 'eros without teleology'.[522]

The daily sensations of maternal subjectivity are converted into literary devices in order to construct an authentic maternal narrative. On the subject of interrupted chronology of plot, Nelson suggests that she intends to avoid 'handholding links': 'the energy of juxtaposition comes when you take all those sentences out. The reader is forced to leap from thing to thing, to make the bridge, and so I guess in some way that lends itself to the fragment because as a poet I'm very invested in what juxtaposition is as a tool. Prose has juxtaposition but it's not always one of its main engine pulls'.[523] The interruption into one's thinking that this technique produces mirrors the sensation of interruption for the maternal subject. Baraitser conjures textual allusions when she refers to the interruption as 'the minute blank created [which stops] her flow, the punctuation mark, the grammatical syncope'.[524] Baraitser's text is not dissimilar from *The Argonauts* in its combining of anecdotal, personal accounts of Baraitser's own experience along with analysis which centres on academic theory; in this way, it is also a hybrid text. By way of rationale for her approximation of 'anecdotal theory,' Baraitser states that 'I try to retain something of the indigestibility of maternal experience by leaving these small, unintegrated and perhaps undigestible nuggets of maternal writing within the more formal academic reflections [...] to interrupt myself, or, as much as possible, throw myself off the subject'.[525]

In a conversation with fellow maternal writer Kate Zambreno, Manguso declares that the 'books I've written since my son was born have been written one pebble at a time, not at all like the books that I once wrote while suspended in a prolonged dream state. [...] That's what time does to a body, whether it's a mother's body or not. The postpartum period is just one particularly intense

---

meditations-queer-mother-memoirs-and-maggie-nelsons-argonauts#Endnote%209> [accessed 15 August 2019]

[520] Monica B. Pearl, 'Theory and the Everyday', Angelaki, 23.1 (2018), pp. 199-203, p. 199.

[521] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 66.

[522] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 66., Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 55.

[523] Maggie Nelson, interviewed by Jess Cotton, *The White Review*, (May 2015) <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-maggie-nelson/> [accessed 15 August 2019]

[524] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 72

[525] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 13

period of damage. Or of forward momentum, which is maybe a better near-synonym'.[526] The accumulation of pebbles dropped intermittently onto a surface serves as a suitable description of Manguso's text, whose pages are, perhaps, even more fragmented than Nelson's prose. The chronology of Manguso's text is disordered; the structures of time and memory are slippery and refuse to harmonise in a prosaic way. Unlike the diary form, with its linear chronology, to which the text is a farewell, it reads like a list or a series of disconnected fragments which the reader must labour to arrange into coherence and meaning. Pages often refer to a different subject matter to the one preceding or following it; the prose is separated into single sentences or short paragraphs, with no chapters or clear sections apart from a symbol at the conclusion of every page; and the layout of the pages is stark. The large gaps between sentences and paragraphs leave the reader in an uncomfortable space, unable to sustain a sense of unimpeded flow in the prose; much like the 'micro-blows' of maternal experience.

Offill employs a layering of fragments and a disregard for linear narrative in a way similar to Manguso and Nelson. The prose jumps between points in time, detailing the narrator's first encounter with her husband, having a child together, her husband's affair, and finally their move to the countryside. The text is full of holes, aesthetically, in the literal space between paragraphs and sentences, as well as through interruptions in the sequence of narration. As with the other texts, sections of narration are broken apart by an insertion of a philosophical or scientific reference, often seemingly unrelated. Wojciech Drag suggests that the juxtaposition of fragments 'follows the technique of film-like montage,' as the 'lack of explicit cross-references between bound and free motifs is a characteristic of montage defined as a combination of "diverse and contrasting elements" which are arranged "without transitions or explanatory passages". The links between the narrative and non-narrative passages are therefore to be supplied by the reader'.[527] We can compare Drag's reading with Baraitser's description of the passing of time in the maternal encounter as '*no longer governed by circadian rhythms, like one long cinematic take [*which] *act to obliterate the passing of time from what it is to come, to what it is, to what has been.*'[528] Offill's narrator refers to a series of lectures listened to by her husband called 'The Long Now,' before learning its real meaning she 'had assumed it meant the feeling of daily life'.[529] The effect of the layering of fragments is a sense of dislocation from predictable temporality for the reader, illustrating an alteration in the narrator's sense of temporal existence. Referring to the text, Offill states that she thinks of her 'prose as expansive,' 'I do try to create vistas of a sort, places where you can see a

---

[526] Sarah Manguso, 'Writing Postpartum: A Conversation between Kate Zambreno and Sarah Manguso', *The Paris Review* (24 April 2019), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/04/24/writing-postpartum-a-conversation-between-kate-zambreno-and-sarah-manguso/> [accessed 15 August 2019]
[527] Wojciech Drag, 'Jenny Offill's Dept. of Speculation and the Revival of Fragmentary Writing', *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies*, 56 (2017), pp. 57-72, p. 67.
[528] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 66.
[529] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 56.

long ways off. But I'm also obsessed with the idea of compression, of creating a dense knot of associations and feeling'.[530] This ties into the sensation of the maternal temporal experience as paradoxically both drawn out and diminished; being capable only of the reactionary thought of the maternal position and yet, as I have argued, holding the possibility of 'an enlivening and productive encounter, one that forces a mother to access a kind of thinking and feeling outside her usual repertoire'.[531] Offill has stated that it was her aim to use the disjunction of fragmented prose to illustrate the maternal experience of 'transcendence undercut by the tedium. I wanted to get that feeling on the page. The solution I came up with was to describe her thoughts and actions in fragments, so that one would always be dislocating the other'.[532]

Offill recalls that she was forced to change her writing style and habits after she become a mother: 'one of the things I had to learn was a new way to write. I used to procrastinate. I used to have these acres of time. And I didn't particularly realize that until it went away. But one of the things that I at least have found from having a child is it's not ever just one way. For a while it will feel like there's no time, and then time will feel expansive again'.[533] The inclination towards concise prose and fragmentation for the maternal writers can partly be explained by the scarcity of time, particularly the reflective time or 'dream-like state' spoken of by Manguso, which was the environment for the creation of these texts. Similarly to Manguso's pebble by pebble approach, Offill reports that she struggled to maintain the initial plan for a 'much more conventional linear novel,' and instead 'found the form when I started jotting it down on index cards. Little bits here and there'.[534] Nelson, too, has stated that *The Argonauts* 'wasn't a book I was aiming to write. [...] I was writing in little fits and starts [...] during the first year of my son's life'.[535] In the text, Nelson describes herself as 'a serial minimalist – an employee, however productive, of the condensery. Rather than a philosopher or a pluralizer, I may be more of an empiricist'.[536] Nelson is not looking to provide answers, that is a role left to the reader, but instead to propose possible links between liminal spaces. Referring to the disparate fragments within her writing, she states that she does not feel a responsibility to make a coherent argument from them; 'the more I write, the more I realise that probably their self-presentation as individual, crystalline paradoxes probably *is* the form. I

---

[530] Jenny Offill, interviewed by Anjali Enjeti, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, (29 June 2014), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/subterranean-lives/> [accessed 17 August 2019].
[531] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 75.
[532] Offill, interviewed by Ceridwen Morris, *The Literary Review*, <http://www.theliteraryreview.org/interview/literary-mothers-a-conversation-book-list/> [accessed 17 August 2019].
[533] Offill, interviewed by Ceridwen Morris, *The Literary Review*, <http://www.theliteraryreview.org/interview/literary-mothers-a-conversation-book-list/> [accessed 17 August 2019].
[534] Jenny Offill, interviewed by Angela Ashman, *The Voice* (29 January 2014), <https://www.villagevoice.com/2014/01/29/qart-monsters/> [accessed 17 August 2019].
[535] Nelson, interviewed by Jess Cotton, *The White Review*, (May 2015) <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-maggie-nelson/> [accessed 15 August 2019].
[536] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* pp. 127-128.

don't need to make a new thing after the form, and that has to do with the nature of the subject I'm thinking about'.[537] Again, we may think of the Argo, with its many changing parts which 'snowball' together to form an identity; here, the parts of the Argo are the 'individual, crystalline' fragments of prose which are drawn together from disparate moments in time and from different subjectivities to form a hybrid text.

The momentum of the plot of each text is not cast along by conventional markers; this reflects a change in the way the mothers/writers think as writers and as mothers, as the perception of themselves, their relationality and the outside world is reconfigured. Though relying to a greater extent on 'conventional' points of textual development than the texts of Nelson, Manguso, and Offill, Cusk's text nonetheless upsets linear, teleological chronology. In the introduction, Cusk states that the text 'describes a period in which time seemed to go round in circles rather than in any chronological order, and so which I have tried to capture in themes rather than by the forgotten procession of its days'.[538] The first chapter is called 'Forty Weeks' and refers to her pregnancy, but this is the first and last temporally themed recollection, and the chapters that follow point to a shift into sensory or somatic themes. Rather than distinct plot points, the text is propelled by changes in Cusk's subjectivity and relationship with her daughter, both of which are often obscure and confusing. In reference to Cusk's break from chronological structure, Frye suggests that the 'use of a conceptual structure – with each chapter. Labelled according to an idea inherent in her mothering experience, rather than temporal progression – reinforces the possibility of multiple dimensions of self'.[539] None of the texts discussed in this chapter can be easily sectioned off into beginning, middle or end, although we could presume that a plot inspired by becoming a mother would follow a pre-determined course i.e. planning for a child, becoming pregnant, giving birth, and the task of parenting a growing baby. While these texts do devote much of their prose to these events, they cannot be said to drive the plot in a predictable way. The narratives advance but they also loop back and linger. Speaking of *Dept. of Speculation*, Offill explains that she attempts to capture 'the feeling of being alive, of being awake. Because of this, I'm more apt to follow the wisp of a thought or a half-glimpsed image than chart a sequential series of events. But I absolutely believe in momentum. Momentum is not plot, but it has the same quality of urgency and forward motion'.[540] Offill and the others share a fidelity to narration inspired by 'half-glimpsed' moments of potential insight or transformation.

---

[537] Nelson, interviewed by Jess Cotton, *The White Review*, (May 2015) <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-maggie-nelson/> [accessed 15 August 2019].
[538] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 9.
[539] Frye, p. 196.
[540] Offill, interviewed by Ceridwen Morris, *The Literary Review*, <http://www.theliteraryreview.org/interview/literary-mothers-a-conversation-book-list/> [accessed 17 August 2019].

The texts do not supply a final event or neat conclusion; we might infer from this that the change in thinking in the mother, which reveals the illusory nature of endings, finds its form. In line with her maternal experience of ongoingness, Manguso states that 'endings are thus formally unappealing to me – that more than beginning or ending, I enjoy continuing'.[541] In the final pages of the text, Manguso notices the way her son 'goes happily on,' that the 'future happens' and that it 'keeps happening,' and finally observes 'the churn of bodies through the world of light unending. Look, here we are, even now –'.[542] Manguso's choice of punctuation and the language leaves the text open, endlessly continuing, just as Manguso now feels herself to be. The final words from Nelson are equally ambiguous and transitory: 'I don't know. I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song.'[543] Again, the prevailing message is about continuing, and Nelson concludes by acknowledging an increased commitment to questions, rather than answers. On the final page of Offill's text, the narrator watches as her daughter 'takes off running' and gets smaller; finally, she states, cryptically, that '[n]o one young knows the name of anything'.[544] There is a sense of movement, relatedness, and ambiguity in Offill's ending, which ties into the maternal subjectivity referred to in the text and elsewhere in interviews.

Multiplicity

Speaking of the work she created after becoming a mother, Zambreno suggests that there was something 'uncanny about this, my new solitude that I write to, always doubled, even as she sleeps'.[545] The maternal writers refer to the struggles and joys of experiencing a doubled subjectivity, as well as the strain of negotiating this new subjectivity with their old selves within the texts, but how is this evident in the form and approach of the writing itself? How are the narratives marked by the relentless presence of the child and the ambivalent relation to the 'former' self? The new 'solitude' referred to by Zambreno is not like the writing solitude known to the mother before the entrance of the child; the loneliness of motherhood is not the same as the loneliness felt in her life beforehand. It is a loneliness which is constantly interrupted by the child, physically and psychologically. For Offill, the loneliness, which was the condition of her life as a poor, young writer, 'has been replaced by a different kind of loneliness, which is more akin to a sense of alienation from the larger role that I'm supposed to be playing'; the societal expectation of the Mother versus the real experience.[546]

---

[541] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 83.
[542] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 88.
[543] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 178.
[544] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation,* p. 177.
[545] Zambreno, *Appendix Project,* p. 110.
[546] Offill, interviewed by Ceridwen Morris, *The Literary Review*, <http://www.theliteraryreview.org/interview/literary-mothers-a-conversation-book-list/> [accessed 17 August 2019].

Part of the process of creating these texts for the maternal writer is to work through their fractured selves, to write from a fragmented subject position. In one of the many instances in which Manguso narrates from the self-aware position of the writer, she admits that following the birth of her son,

> The diary was of no help. Emerging from the sickening exhaustion of the first few months, I began to see the work I might do next – this, an assemblage of already exploded bits that cohere anyway, a reminder that what seems like a violent interruption seldom is.[547]

The keeping of a diary is a private, individual endeavour, and the diarist views the world from a position of solitude; a position that becomes impossible after becoming a mother. Manguso's assemblage of 'exploded bits' can be compared to Nelson's 'going to pieces' and Cusk's metaphor of her disfigured face. As with Cusk and Nelson, the exploded bits represent Manguso's disordered temporality and the confusion surrounding her reconfigured subjectivity. But through the act of producing the text, the 'exploded bits' of maternal subjectivity may recover from the interruption and begin to cohere; although, not in the same organisation as before. This is exemplified in the text's fragmented form and its multiple, shifting voices. Compared to the insular and temporally predictable pages of the diary, *Ongoingness* is ephemeral and dynamic. Page by page, the point of view jumps between Manguso as mother, as writer, as teacher, and as an infant herself. Her narrative oscillates through all of these subjectivities, as she contemplates where her place is in time, memory, and as a being in the world; these are the lenses through which she works to reconfigure her 'exploded bits.' The text may be considered the path Manguso travels back along to rediscover her identity as a writer. Yet, she will be a writer of a different kind after becoming a mother, as her subjectivity is reconfigured and her perceptions are altered through the maternal encounter. Manguso has described herself as 'just floating in space, hopelessly waiting to turn back into a writer' while she recovers from the 'intense period of damage' or enforced momentum that is motherhood: 'I think failure and creative blocks are interesting, especially as they intersect with the double threats that occur after becoming a mother, of needing to make money and needing to remain a writer (or remain sane, or a self, or alive) – needing to remain in the marketplace, but also privately, where one's identity also becomes distorted.'[548] The fragmented, condensed form of Manguso's prose reflects the style of writing which may be produced during 'the wild velocity of motherhood'. A process which requires a paradoxical type of writing reflecting the conflicts within

---

[547] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 46.
[548] Manguso, 'Writing Postpartum: A Conversation between Kate Zambreno and Sarah Manguso', *The Paris Review* (24 April 2019), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/04/24/writing-postpartum-a-conversation-between-kate-zambreno-and-sarah-manguso/> [accessed 15 August 2019].

maternal subjectivity, full of openings and questions, yet necessarily succinct and direct. As Manguso considers that: 'My prose began to judge or summarize its subject before it took any time to observe that subject [...] Is it possible to truly observe one's own child, as a writer must, while also simultaneously loving him? Does a mother have something like writer's block – *perceiver's block?*'.[549]

Offill's text not only switches between subjectivities, it mixes narrative voices: most of the text is written in the first person but flips into a disoriented, estranged third person halfway through and only returns to the first person on the final page. The narrator, who is mother, wife, writer, mourning 'art monster' and speculator of the title all at once, begins by referring to herself in the first person. The principal characters within the text are not named; the narrator is nameless, as is her husband, her daughter, her mysterious friend 'the philosopher' and her employer 'the almost astronaut.' The narrative switches to third person when the husband's infidelity is discovered, as the narrator distances herself from the situation as well as the language. Her husband becomes 'the husband,' she becomes 'the wife' and her daughter becomes 'the daughter.' The prose changes at this point, too, deteriorating momentarily into the squeezed together and repeated phrase: 'soscared'. The damage caused in this moment to the narrator is portrayed through the unstable prose and alienated language.

Offill uses the term 'unhinged' to designate a character who has become unmoored, 'someone who was really kind of standing to the side, no longer able to feel a part of that crowd going by'.[550] The sensation of being dislocated from the usual structures of time, unmoored from the known parameters of oneself and watching the world as if from outer space. Throughout the text, the central characters are made ambiguous open structures through their namelessness – instead, the solidity of being named is reserved for the historical and literary figures frequently conjured into existence. Contemplating herself in death, Offill's narrator declares: '*Here lies one whose name was writ in water'*.[551] The unmoored, shifting narrative perspective and language represents the looseness of the narrator's identity and subjectivity: Offill states that the 'different degrees of authorial distance' in the text are designed to 'create the sensation of floating into and out of the story, to make you aware as a reader that the story is a constructed thing, an assemblage of pieces'.[552] It is a technique which allows the reader to experience the disjointed, uncanny maternal sensation of being beside yourself, fleetingly outside your own narrative, looking back at yourself as if from outer space.

---

[549] Manguso, *Ongoingness,* p. 72.
[550] Offill, interviewed by Ceridwen Morris, *The Literary Review*, <http://www.theliteraryreview.org/interview/literary-mothers-a-conversation-book-list/> [accessed 17 August 2019].
[551] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation*, p. 18.
This phrase was spoken by the poet John Keats and is written on his gravestone in place of his name.
[552] Offill, interviewed by Anjali Enjeti, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, (29 June 2014), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/subterranean-lives/> [accessed 17 August 2019].

Nelson's motif of the Argo as a term for a fragmented, transitory identity is reflected in the layering and weaving of narrative segments along with the changing voices and subjectivities in *The Argonauts*. For Nelson, the 'project at hand' in the text is negotiating the intertwining subjectivities of mother, partner, writer, and daughter, and plotting them in a way that suits the experience. The narrative style is personal, concerned with Nelson's changing body and consciousness, but there are also strands which are collaborative and relational. The story of the death of Harry's mother is told directly by Harry, being designated to the reader by the italicising of the text, the lowering of all upper-case letters and the insertion of Harry's name into the margin. It is not only Harry whom Nelson invites into the narrative; in a similarly intimate way, the text calls upon the words of other writers, scholars and artists. Their words are recounted in italics and inserted symbiotically into the body of the text; 'other people's sentences blend into Nelson's, they seem to belong there, as residents of her mind she must contend with'.[553] If the text is an investigation into a shifting identity as it relates to family, motherhood, pregnancy, and domesticity, then Nelson's inclusion of multiple voices points to her assertion that identity is always relational, that it does not perform its transformations in isolation. Moira Donegan has suggested that it 'wouldn't be a stretch, given the nod to [Judith] Butler, to read Nelson's method of citation as a way of constructing her identity as a writer'.[554] The diversity of the citations Nelson uses, from psychoanalysts and philosophers to performance artists, suggests that she views her identity as multifarious, refusing to conform to a singular arrangement.

A Form of Family-Making

Nelson has referred to her use of 'names in the margin as another scene of family-making'; a technique she has borrowed from Roland Barthes' autobiography, which is cited by Nelson as one the 'principal "ghost texts" of *The Argonauts*'.[555] A central exploration within Nelson's text is the creation of her family, as she navigates the domestic labour of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, marriage and step-parenting. By connecting the dialogues of domesticity and 'high' theory in the seamless way that Nelson does through her narrative, she is suggesting that the two belong together in the same conversation. This is a technique shared by the other maternal writers in this chapter to varying degrees and through different approaches; in some way, the texts all make use of secondary material to supplement and benefit their maternal narratives. Offill employs a wide range of other people's thoughts and writing within her text, as well as references to historical

---

[553] Moira Donegan, ''Gay as in Happy': On Maggie Nelson', *n+1*, 23 (2015), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-23/reviews/gay-as-in-happy/> [accessed 20 August 2019].
[554] Donegan, ''Gay as in Happy': On Maggie Nelson'.
[555] Nelson, interviewed by Adam Fitzgerald, *LitHub*, (5 May 2015) <https://lithub.com/the-argonauts-diary-theory-poem-memoir/> [accessed 15 August 2019].

events or scientific facts. The references are mostly supplied in the original wording or through Offill's rephrasing alongside the narrator's personal testimony. They are less seamlessly integrated into the text than Nelson's usage, producing a moment in which the reader is jolted from the personal narrative as other voices are inserted into the account, having the effect of transforming it into a collective. Like *The Argonauts*, Offill's text is multi-voiced; Drag argues that the insertion of each external source 'is an act of importing the source text's perspective with a whole set of associations. Offill's novel can therefore be said to incorporate as many perspectives as the authors it quotes or references. Hesiod, Martin Luther and Yuri Gagarin thus become observers and advisors or commentators on the personal problems of the narrator-protagonist'.[556]

Cusk includes poetry and extracts from novels whose insights 'seemed to give voice' to the theme of motherhood, explaining that she was drawn to these pieces while in the throes of becoming a mother.[557] From Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, to Edith Wharton's Lily Bart, Frances Hodgson Burnett's Mary Lennox, and Flaubert's Emma Bovary, Cusk calls upon many well-known literary figures to sit alongside her maternal narrative. The references are cited in a way that is both critical and personal, as Cusk uses them in search of her own maternal identity. Alongside the fictional references, there are exhaustive discussions of childcare literature, from manuals such as Dr Spock's *Baby and Child Care* to the work of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. For the most part, Cusk finds these examples lacking and bewildering, as they serve to accentuate her feelings of inadequacy and detachment: 'The more I read, the more my daughter recedes from me and becomes an object whose use I must re-learn, whose conformity to other objects like her is a matter for liminal anxiety.'[558] The childcare literature Cusk encounters is obtuse, with its focus on inflexible process, conformity, and a favouring of sterile practicality over deeper understanding or maternal solidarity. The effect is alienating, leaving Cusk to imagine herself as existing outside of the recognized maternal conversation: 'I leaf through books on the subject looking for some mention of myself, some hint of concern for me as I sit pinioned twenty to thirty times a day in my armchair, but there is none.'[559] Cusk is desperate to discover a maternal literature which aligns with her experience and finding the texts intended for this use inadequate, so she turns to the fiction writers who are familiar to her. A central dilemma is that Cusk struggles to find writing on motherhood with a focus beyond the mundane, everyday tasks of domesticity; there is a lack of literature which aims to answer 'the larger question of what it is to turn from a woman into a mother,' to provide an ontological examination of motherhood.[560] I would argue that this is the objective of the maternal texts discussed in this chapter: to create a philosophical, experiential

[556] Drag, p. 69.
[557] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 9.
[558] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 111.
[559] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* pp. 98-99.
[560] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 8.

account of the maternal encounter which explores the effect the everyday tasks of motherhood have on a woman's experience of herself and the world around her.

In this way, these writers are working to create a maternal narrative that is lacking in existing literature and in the cultural dialogue. If we return to the idea of Nelson's citations as 'family-making,' we can hypothesise that each writers' collection of outside voices helps to build a maternal subjectivity which aligns with their experiences and connects motherhood to central philosophical debates. Each reference marks a facet of the maternal identity, as the parts of the Argo construct the whole. Beyond this, Donegan argues that Nelson's 'citations fulfil a second purpose, of suggesting a kind of heritage,' giving the suppositions on maternal subjectivity a grounding in serious academic sources.[561] Donegan goes on to state that 'the unconventional forms of [Nelson's] writing arise from very conventional inclinations: with her incessant quotation and frequent pose of interrogative investigation, she seems to be reaching for the credibility of research, and the comfort of intellectual precedent'.[562] I would contend that this argument is only partially valid: as a writer and teacher with a background in academic research and critical consciousness, Nelson does fall back upon the sources of her pre-maternal identity, but by doing so she insists that critical sources of this type *belong* alongside, not only an intensely personal testimony, but an account of maternal experience. The recent increase of fiction and non-fiction texts dedicated to the matrifocal narrative work to claim a canonical space for mothers and for maternal writers, but the texts in this chapter take this goal further. Speaking on the subject of the historically absent maternal narrative in literature, Tillie Olsen has proposed that it suggests a deeper loss 'to other fields of human knowledge and action as well, because comprehensions possible out of motherhood (*including,* among so much invaluable else, *the very nature, needs, illimitable potentiality of the human being – and the everyday means by which they are distorted, discouraged, limited, extinguished)* have never had the circumstances to come to powerful, undeniable, useful expression – have had instead to remain inchoate, fragmentary, unformulated (and alas, unvalidated)'.[563] Nelson and the other writers are not only bringing the maternal subject into a literary space, they are claiming its value and power for working through wider philosophical questions about the human condition.

Queering Motherhood

Nelson makes an argument against the 'dreary binary' presumption that the domestic experience only occupies space outside the realm of serious 'high-brow' art and literature, both analytical and

[561] Donegan, ''Gay as in Happy': On Maggie Nelson'.
[562] Donegan, ''Gay as in Happy': On Maggie Nelson'.
[563] Olsen, p. 202.

anecdotal.[564] In 1998, during the first few weeks of her graduate study, she recalls an encounter she witnessed between art critic Rosalind Krauss and literary theorist Jane Gallop. It took place during a seminar in which Gallop presented a series of candid photographs of herself and her son, photographed by her husband, which she read through Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida.* Gallop was

> trying to talk about photography from the standpoint of the photographed subject, which, as she said, "may be the position from which it is most difficult to claim valid general insights." And she was coupling this subjective position with that of being a mother, in an attempt to get at the experience of being photographed as a mother (another position generally assumed to be, as Gallop put it, "troublingly personal, anecdotal, self-concerned").[565]

Following the presentation, Krauss verbally dismembers Gallop for her 'mediocrity, naivete, and soft-mindedness,' for 'staging a fling' with a philosophy over whom she does not possess a mastery, and, most of all, for attempting to bring 'a pudgy mother in love with her son' into the academic realm. Nelson states that, despite having no plans to have a baby at that time, as a feminist, she rejected 'any kneejerk quarantining of the feminine or the maternal from the realm of intellectual profundity'.[566] This instinctive reaction to the marrying of the maternal and intellectual anticipates Nelson's anti-binary, pluralistic approach to her own family-making and writing two decades later.

Nelson's pairing of maternal subjectivity with academic investigation is part of her larger project of queering motherhood; *The Argonauts* can be described as a queer memoir not only through its exploration of gender, identity, and non-heteronormative parenting, but in its queering of the potential topics of discussion associated with motherhood. Nelson parallels motherhood and the domestic with 'highbrow' genres of art, intellectualism, academia, sexual desire, and gender fluidity. In discussing A. L. Steiner's 2012 installation *Puppies and Babies*, Nelson dismisses the 'dreary binary that would pit casual snapshots of "adorable" puppies and babies and their myriad caretakers and companions against "highbrow" genres of art' as 'a malodorous missive from the mainstream'.[567] The exhibition strikes her as queer because it acts as 'a terrific antidote to such sneering, with its joy-swirl of sodomitical parenthood, [and] caretaking of all kinds'.[568] Away from the binary, Nelson searches for a diversified understanding of motherhood and the 'raucous

---

[564] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 88.
[565] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 49.
[566] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 52.
[567] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 88.
[568] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 89.

perversities' that may occupy the same space; when motherhood is seen, even by feminist theorists, as having no space for an erotics, then Nelson's approach is subversive and queer. Illustrating this ingrained cultural discord, Nelson remembers taking her son Iggy at five months old to an adults-only trapeze-burlesque show and being turned away at the door by a bouncer. Quoting Susan Fraiman, she senses that the implicit message of this refusal is that people do not want their adult's night out polluted by "'procreative femininity'".[569] Elsewhere in the text, Nelson addresses the public discomfort between sexuality and motherhood explicitly by writing about the constipation experienced during pregnancy alongside discussions about women's anal eroticism and descriptions of the vivid pleasure she feels 'the first time you fuck me up the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor'.[570]

As well as this subversion, through the form and content of the text, Nelson insists upon the co-existence of the domestic and the intellectual. She does this throughout the text in her technique of intermingling personal testimony related to maternal experience with academic interrogation, an approach which is summed up by a metaphor: Nelson recalls that her mother laminated 'the page in *The New York Times* that listed me as a Guggenheim recipient' and, unable to throw the Guggenheim placement away, 'I've since placed it below Iggy's high chair, to catch the food that flows downward'.[571] In this moment, the reader is faced with a confrontation of the domestic with the intellectual, an approach which reflects Nelson's wider attitude to the two realms. The decision to address the blending of the 'high-brow' with motherhood is echoed in Zambreno's essay 'Accumulations' in *Appendix Project*, which begins by listing the pieces of art in front of which she has nursed her son. This is a conscious effort on her part to breastfeed in gallery spaces; to bring the intimate act of maternal nurture into a place of traditional as well as avant-garde art. At first, during this practise, she felt 'panicky and self-conscious,' but as time went on, she became 'used to taking my breast out in art spaces, and began to savour it with sometimes a fatigued perversity and other times something more sacred'.[572] The tableau of Zambreno nursing her daughter becomes an artwork itself, like 'the way in which Mary presses down on her breast and points the nipple towards baby Jesus' or in the way her breast peeks out through her leather jacket, 'like a floppy blue-veined sac of a sculpture, scratched and sad'.[573] Though Zambreno frames her nursing act as a part of the artwork, it is clear that the real breastfeeding mother is less welcome than the 'bubblegum phallic Franz West sculpture,' the various penises in Harry Dodge's gender show video, or even, in front of the nursing Jesus in the 'El Greco Holy Family'. Nursing in front of these works, Zambreno is asked repeatedly to move; like Nelson, her desire to persist despite

[569] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 84.
[570] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 3.
[571] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 19.
[572] Zambreno, p. 100.
[573] Zambreno, pp. 100-101.

this, as well as to place the two side-by-side in written form, illustrates an aim to queer the maternal subject in cultural understanding.

Both Nelson and Zambreno discuss Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, in which she is figured nursing her one-year-old child, as an example of a piece of artwork that combines motherhood with queerness – 'polluting' the queer art world with maternity. An acquaintance of Zambreno's 'had shown the Opie photograph in their queer lit class, and all the students commented that the baby seemed too old [...] I found it funny, the students' judgement about the maternal body, in a class on queerness'.[574] Nelson refers to an interviewer who suggests that Opie's artwork is 'shocking' in its combining of a 'blissful domestic' scene alongside Opie's history of sadomasochistic practice. This is because you can still see the scarring of the word 'pervert' across Opie's chest in the portrait, a vestige of past artworks, which offers 'a rebus of sodomitical maternity: the pervert need not die or even go into hiding per se, but nor is adult sexuality foisted upon the child, made its burden'.[575] The undertone of these two judgements, the journalist who is shocked by Opie's radical dualism and the students who are made uncomfortable by it, is that the perverted does not belong in the same domain as motherhood, and that the practices and ideologies of domesticity and mothering threaten the boundaries of queerness. Nelson concurs with Opie's reframing of this antithetical view, stating that 'it's the binary of normative/transgressive that's unsustainable, along with the demand that anyone live a life that's all one thing'.[576] This is in line with her assertions about the inherent queerness of pregnancy and mother, that it puts you beside yourself and opens up new possibilities. She argues that 'any bodily experience can be made new and strange, that nothing we do in this life need have a lid crammed on it, that no one set of practices or relations has a monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative'.[577] *The Argonauts* can be read as a queer text which rallies against normative readings of motherhood through its refusal to limit the associations it discusses. Answering a question on the creative process of the text, Nelson states that she was concurrently writing about her son as well as an

> essay on A. L. Steiner's art show; all the while I was researching a more scholarly book about freedom that I still aim to write someday. Suddenly it seemed clear that all these strands were actually part of one project. I mean, it was a stretch to think so, but the stretch then became the book's challenge – how to show (insist, really) that these topics were, are, interrelated, especially when the culture, whatever that might mean, labors to keep them partitioned.[578]

---

[574] Zambreno, p. 102.
[575] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 80.
[576] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 93.
[577] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 91.
[578] Nelson, interviewed by Adam Fitzgerald, *LitHub*, (5 May 2015) <https://lithub.com/the-argonauts-diary-theory-poem-memoir/> [accessed 15 August 2019].

Queering Subjectivity and Genre

In this chapter so far, I have made the argument that the work of this group of maternal writers expand the limited parameters of maternal subjectivity and the narrative of motherhood within literature and culture. Together, they insist upon a maternal subjectivity which is fluid, fragmented and ambiguous; I have argued that the writing produced in the wake of such a subjective experience presents echoes in its form, register, and structure. The texts are hybrid and multi-layered in a way that parallels the maternal subject; they combine personal and critical, fiction and non-fiction, mundane and philosophical. They refuse unitary or existing forms of writing and work to build an original form best fitting the maternal experience. In her text, Nelson explicitly rejects the 'needless' binaries associated with traditional fiction, stating that 'it purports to provide occasions for thinking through complex issues, but really it has predetermined positions, stuffed a narrative full of false choices, and hooked you on them, rendering you less able to see out, to *get* out'.[579] On her own approach to writing, Nelson uses the analogy of the game 'Breakout', a game which repeatedly bounces a cursor against a bank of bricks, slowly chipping away at its solidity before breaking out; it is the breakout which is the 'thrill because of all the triangulation, all the monotony, all the effort, all the obstruction, all the shapes and sounds that were its predecessor. I need those colored bricks to chip away at, because the eating into them makes the form'.[580] We may consider the bricks to be traditional forms of genre and the continuous turn to external voices, against which Nelson butts her own authorial impulse. If the form is inspired by the subjective experience, then the bricks of breakout are also the identifying facets of a subject; useful to a point but not fully constitutive.

Pearl comments on the many reviews of Nelson's text which refer to it as 'genre-bending' and even, problematically, as 'gender-bending,' and notes the linkage between the two words: 'Genre and gender are the same word, "a kind" or "type," and come from the same root (the root "gen" means to give birth, beget).'[581] Both terms are a means of classification, of identifying something as one thing and not another, yet neither '"genre nor gender is as categorically stable as common usage tends to imply"'.[582] Pearl maintains that the Argo of Nelson's title refers not only to the structure, as I have argued, but to the genre of the text too. Genre works as an Argo; 'it has a rough structure and with it a name. Those things that fit into the rubric of that structure are called by that name; at the same time, what is claimed and named under that structure changes the category'.[583] In

[579] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 102.
[580] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* pp. 76-77.
[581] Pearl, p. 200.
[582] Pearl, p. 200.
[583] Pearl, p. 200.

this understanding of genre, it is fluid and changeable, like queerness or gender, it is a 'placeholder' for moving parts. From the analysis of the experience of motherhood presented in the first section of this chapter, we can understand maternal subjectivity to fall into the same form; one defined by hybridity, multiplicity, ambiguity, and instability. Viewed together, these maternal narratives represent a new direction in matrifocal literature and the written form more generally. I do not intend to categorise the texts in any one specific genre as it seems clear that this would contradict the form, content, and the intended authorial ambition, as well as playing into the traps of identitarism and orthodoxy which the writers and protagonists work against. I will explore a variety of genres that one could argue the texts fall into in order to make the argument that these are hybrid texts, drawing features from multiple genres and therefore eluding classification. I will also explore Stacie Friend's use of genre theory, which argues that forms of literature are propelled into different, original realms by their use of 'contra-standard' features. Through the texts' use of 'contra-standard' features, mixing, and defying classical genre categorisation, they demand a divergent understanding of the maternal subject from their reader.

We cannot dismiss the importance of the timeline of the texts in the chapter as they fit into a wider growth in maternal writing in the last two decades and beyond. Published in 2001 and the earliest of the texts discussed in the chapter, Cusk's memoir represents a watershed moment for women's personal testimonies on motherhood. At the time of publication, Cusk's portrayal of her mothering experience received reviews which accused her of 'child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual'.[584] The readers who deemed the text and Cusk herself too intellectual seem to have a difficulty figuring intellectualism, beyond pure corporeality and instinctual nurture, as existing alongside the mother's care for children. Cusk refers to a review by the journalist Zoe Williams in which she states: '"I have about as much interest in babies as I have in cavity-wall insulation. You might feel moved to describe the moments of desperation that follow nine hours of incessant wailing. It might not occur to you that, just because it's a horrific experience doesn't make it interesting. If you had a baby, you did so because you wanted one. If you are suffering sleep deprivation so severe you're hallucinating, that was your choice."'[585] The implication in this review is that not only are motherhood and the thinking, self-conscious subject incompatible, but that it is a topic not worthy of attention beyond its own limited and static dimensions, not in literature and certainly not in wider public discourse.

A Life's Work was singular in its unsentimental, philosophical and critical approach at that time, preceded perhaps only by Rich's memoir *Of Woman Born* decades earlier in the 1970s, and it is not a stretch to state that every maternal writer has written in the wake of Cusk and continues to

---

[584] Rachel Cusk, 'I was only being honest', *The Guardian* (21 March 2008), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/21/biography.women> [accessed 7 November 2019].
[585] Cusk, 'I was only being honest'.

build upon her foundation. Explaining the drive for her own work, Offill suggests that Cusk's text represents for her and for other mothers a side of motherhood not openly discussed:

> I could feel the intensity of Cusk pushing back: All this is happening, but I refuse to be turned into a mother. *Just* a mother. [...] you're not even supposed to talk about it. You're supposed to give yourself over to this avalanche of minutiae, not ever be bothered by the tedium of it or by the way you go from having many roles that matter – writer, wife, friend, daughter – to suddenly only one: Mother.[586]

Conceding that 'I can see why writers like Rachel Cusk are dragged over the coals,' Nelson argues that the labels of 'selfishness' or 'impropriety' are invariably only applied to female writers who use their children and themselves as subjects; a double standard that seeks to detract from the work as a piece of art.[587]

Beyond *A Life's Work,* these maternal writers have created narratives which are neither fiction nor non-fiction, treading a line between autobiographical and non-autobiographical. Cusk's work is explicitly auto-biographical, as she suggests in the introduction when she writes that 'I have merely written down what I thought of the experience of having a child in a way that I hope other people can identify with'.[588] This approach leaves her open and vulnerable, as she goes on to admit that as a novelist she finds 'this candid type of writing slightly alarming'.[589] The rest of the maternal writers make no such claims of fidelity to true events in their texts, distancing themselves in varying amounts from their protagonists. Laura Di Summa-Knoop argues that traditional memoirs are seen as 'confessions and confessions can hardly avoid being connected to moral features'.[590] In other words, the memoirist opens themselves up to direct moral judgement from the reader; Cusk's maternal 'confession' fell into the trap of moral condemnation and, as has been evidenced, mothers and female writers are likely to be judged more harshly as well. One could surmise that writers such as Nelson, Offill, and Manguso distance themselves from their narratives in order to avoid such restrictive moral judgements. By eluding generic classification, their texts escape kneejerk reaction. 'Historically, women have never had a straightforward or comfortable relationship with the genre of autobiography,' Pearl suggests, and 'even women whose proximity to the category lesbian comes from refusing or kicking against it have had to come up with novel names and

---

[586] Offill, interviewed by Ceridwen Morris, *The Literary Review*, <http://www.theliteraryreview.org/interview/literary-mothers-a-conversation-book-list/> [accessed 17 August 2019].
[587] Nelson, interviewed by Adam Fitzgerald, *LitHub*, (5 May 2015) <https://lithub.com/the-argonauts-diary-theory-poem-memoir/> [accessed 15 August 2019].
[588] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 4.
[589] Cusk, *A Life's Work,* p. 4.
[590] Laura Di Summa-Knoop, 'Critical Autobiography: A New Genre?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 9.1 (2017), pp. 1-12, p. 6.

methods to do their life writing'.[591] Nelson questions the extent to which a personal testimony is ever 'authentic': 'When it comes to my own writing, if I insist that there is a persona or a performativity at work, I don't mean to say that I'm not myself in my writing, or that my writing somehow isn't me'.[592] There is an inherent slipperiness to autobiography, as well as fiction, to which Baraitser refers when she suggests that her accounts are 'all originally autobiographical, although I no longer really know how true they are, having been embellished, altered, tampered with and edited in the process of writing'.[593] The ambiguity of the 'authenticity' of the mother figure and range of authorial distance from the narratives reflects the sensation of alterity in the mothering process. If the reader feels they may not rely on the narrator of the text it echoes the maternal experience of feeling detached from one's moorings and unable to recognise the new configuration of parts. I do not suggest that these maternal narratives are not 'honest,' rather the opposite, that through their portrayal of the mother-narrator as unstable they more accurately illustrate the experience.

The texts borrow techniques and traits from a number of genres to become literary amalgamations, like Nelson's titular Argo. Many of their stylistic features align with contemporary essayistic nonfiction or the personal essay, defined by the coexistence of personal testimony and critical analysis.[594] Joe Moran acknowledges that the 'segmented nature of essayistic nonfiction allows it especially to mine this seam between raw experience and considered reflection'.[595] The aim of the personal essay or essayistic nonfiction is to discover what can be known about the self; it does this by 'abandoning the chronological coherence of an orthodox life story' and not relying on the chapter or paragraph for its structure. Instead it 'relies on evocative juxtaposition, forcing the reader to make intellectual and emotional leaps across the white space of the page [...] [t]hese breaks let the text move quickly across different discursive realms – between the personal and impersonal, the concrete and the abstract, the anecdotal and the analytical – unimpeded by the need for connective padding'.[596] This is a device shared with the practice of autofiction, which is characterised by its departure from linear, sequential, chronological time as well as its radical shifts in narrative perspective. Autofiction springs from its roots in autobiography to perform an exploration of the self which is multi-layered and experimental. Hywel Dix suggests that autofiction permits a larger degree of experimentation partly because it has often been 'written in the aftermath of some kind of traumatic experience – real or imagined – so that the process of writing in response to trauma can be seen as a means of situating the self in a new context when

---

[591] Pearl, p. 201.
[592] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 75.
[593] Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters,* p. 13.
[594] Joe Moran, 'Walking with a Purpose: The Essay in Contemporary Nonfiction', *Textual Practice*, 32.8 (2018), pp. 1277-1299, p. 1293.
[595] Moran, p. 1293.
[596] Moran, pp. 1279-1280.

other relational constructs have been removed or jeopardized'.[597] If we consider the maternal encounter as a form of everyday trauma, especially in its evident power to dislocate the mother's sense of self, then the autofiction process of writing as a way to rediscover one's place holds true for the maternal texts. Beyond this, one of the insights of autofiction is that it does not 'portray a person's existing subjectivity for all time,' but acknowledges that 'subjectivity is elusive and hence [sic] place[s] the subject of the narrative endlessly in question'.[598] Therefore, one could argue that the maternal texts borrow stylistically and aesthetically from the contemporary essay, as it 'thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented, and gains unity by moving through fissures,' and suits a description of autofiction for its treatment of the self as transitory and inherently inter-relational.[599]

Di Summa-Knoop begins a formulation of a new subgenre which she calls critical-autobiography; many of the features in the texts discussed in the chapter also fit into her category of critical-autobiography. Beginning with a discussion of the standard features of memoir, to which, arguably, these texts partially belong, Summa-Knoop explains that memoir can be regarded as a philosophical tool, as a way to actively 'do philosophy'. In this sense, the maternal texts share in the history of the philosophical memoir, are descendants of Rousseau or St. Augustine, in their desire to use the form as a philosophical tool. But there is little tradition of the domestic-philosophical memoir or autobiography within the literary canon or within cultural perception, so their decision to use the maternal encounter *as* the philosophical tool is innovative. Offill has explicitly stated her desire to go against the grain by writing a philosophical novel from the narrative perspective of a woman and set in the domestic realm: 'I kind of had this idea that it would be interesting to write a novel that was set in the domestic sphere, like so many books are, but that also had more of that novel-of-ideas and philosophical-novels feel.'[600] Zambreno considers that we are 'only beginning to approach the writing of new motherhood as a lived philosophy, and everything within that – the critique of capitalism, of the oppression of the family and gender roles and maintenance labor, but also the beauty inherent in a meditation on time and body and mortality, the sense of connection and alienation, the uncanniness and intense love and porousness of that bond'.[601] What Zambreno suggests here is that writing about motherhood constitutes a different kind of 'doing philosophy,' one that is characterised by its ongoingness and inter-relationality.

Di Summa-Knoop identifies three standard features of the traditional memoir: firstly, the work should be created under a 'pact' that it will be an authentic confession, which elicits an empathic

---

[597] Dix, p. 4.
[598] Dix, p. 6.
[599] Moran, p. 1279.
[600] Offill, interviewed by Angela Ashman, *The Voice* (29 January 2014), <https://www.villagevoice.com/2014/01/29/qart-monsters/> [accessed 17 August 2019].
[601] Kate Zambreno, 'Writing Postpartum: A Conversation between Kate Zambreno and Sarah Manguso', *The Paris Review* (24 April 2019), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/04/24/writing-postpartum-a-conversation-between-kate-zambreno-and-sarah-manguso/> [accessed 15 August 2019].

and sympathetic response from the reader towards the memoirist; secondly, 'the events of life should be weaved together in a narrative structure involving relevant causal connections and a sense of closure that is often coupled with a feeling of emotional resolution; thirdly, based on the notion that our lives are structured by 'meaningful narrative connections – as opposed to a haphazard juxtaposition of events,' the memoir allows for a 'deeper understanding of who we are and of our status as moral agents'.[602] In order to illustrate her case for the subgenre of critical-autobiography and for the fluidity of genre more widely, Di Summa-Knoop calls upon the interpretation of genre theory put forward by Stacie Friend. Friend's use of the terms standard and contra-standard are particularly significant when discussing the hybridisation of texts. By way of definition Friend states that a 'feature of a work is *standard* if possession of that feature places or tends to place the work in a particular category', for example: 'flatness is standard for painting'.[603] However, a 'feature is *contra-standard* if possession of that feature excludes or tends to exclude the work from the category,' for instance: 'stream-of-consciousness narration is contra-standard for science textbooks'.[604] Classification of works into different genres alters the way we experience, understand, and evaluate them: we expect a work labelled as fiction to engage us imaginatively through narrative, with descriptions of events that have not happened and names that fail to refer; to make claims that are not assertions by the author. Nonfiction, on the other hand, will be expected to be 'faithful to the facts; references to real people, places and events; assertions that convey the author's views'.[605] But Friend argues that standard features are just that; they are typical components of a certain genre but do not necessarily define it and the absence of these traits in a work does not exclude it from a particular genre. This understanding makes way for more expansive classifications of genre; for instance, the novel may have elements of the author's life in it but still be classed as fiction, and, conversely, the memoir may not rely solely on 'authentic confession' yet remain within the category of autobiography.[606] Most significantly for these texts, Friend argues that examples of contra-standard works of literature disrupt the reader's expectations of that genre and push the genre into innovative directions.

Di Summa-Knoop suggests that a growing amount of work 'is playing "on the edge" of this boundary' between fiction and nonfiction and makes this 'voluntary ambiguity' central to the text.[607] In her argument for the classification of critical-autobiography, Summa-Knoop states that they 'are challenging the confessional nature of autobiographies, they are questioning the need for a causal narrative structure that is capable of achieving emotional closure, and, lastly, they are

---

[602] Di Summa-Knoop, p. 6.
[603] Friend, Stacie, 'Fiction as a Genre', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 112.2 (2012), pp. 179–209, p. 186.
[604] Friend, p. 186.
[605] Friend, p. 187.
[606] Friend, p. 187.
[607] Di Summa-Knoop, p. 2.

rethinking the analogy between the memoirist and the narrative self, introducing alternative ways of conceiving the bond between identity and life writing'.[608] If we consider the maternal texts discussed in this chapter in light of this definition, we might argue that many of their features suit the classification of critical-autobiography. In fact, Di Summa-Knoop refers to Nelson's *The Argonauts* as an example of this new subgenre due to its 'departure from standard narrative conventions' and the moments in which 'acute criticism blends with life'.[609] The maternal texts share a register with Di Summa-Knoop's developing subgenre: she suggests that, unlike most works in the autobiographical tradition, 'critical autobiographies are not, for the most part designed for triggering strong sympathetic or empathic responses. In fact, it is not uncommon to find some of the protagonists somewhat unnerving'.[610] The maternal writers do not portray the maternal voice or narrative in a sentimental, idealistic register associated with many fictional literary mother figures and are not concerned by providing their readers with convenient conclusions and instead, strive to depict a fully developed maternal subject within their texts. Summa-Knoop further considers the critical autobiography to be uninterested in weaving the plot according to standard emotional patterns associated with memoirs; for 'engagement, in these works, is based less on emotional identification (broadly construed) than it is on a cognitive understanding of the difficulties that can emerge when stretching the boundaries of a genre: when life-writing is scrutinized not for its power to reveal, but for its ambiguity, for its lack of clear coordinates to follow'.[611] The maternal texts make the sensation of ambiguity central to their narratives in line with the experience of maternal subjectivity. Arguably the works do ask their reader for a degree of emotional identification through their maternal testimonies but undercut and disturb standard emotional trajectories through their use of secondary sources, fragmented form, ambiguous characters, and interrupted chronology. According to Di Summa-Knoop, the memoirists of today are direct witnesses to the recent boom that memoir has experienced and therefore are more likely to view it as a place for potential experimentation; I would suggest that the writers of these maternal texts consciously work in the context of the contemporary explosion of motherhood memoirs and seek to dismantle both the memoir form and the popular 'momoir'. Though not all the texts are classified as memoirs – Offill's text is labelled a novel but arguably presents itself as a memoir– they all work within a loose memoir tradition. Di Summa-Knoop usefully explains that a text may lack the 'nonfictional intent' and still be understood as a memoir: 'the actual "percentage" of fictional or nonfictional element is far less important than their critical stance toward recurring themes in the autobiographical tradition. Specifically, the works mentioned, share a preoccupation with how contemporary identities may get to express themselves, a preoccupation that is literary

[608] Di Summa-Knoop, p. 7.
[609] Di Summa-Knoop, pp. 8-9.
[610] Di Summa-Knoop, p. 11.
[611] Di Summa-Knoop, p. 11.

and stylistic'.[612] Through this understanding, we may consider Offill's text stylistically to be a memoir in as much as Cusk's *A Life's Work*, though it lacks the autobiographical authorial intent. We may draw a line between Friend's characterisation of the term contra-standard as it relates to literary genre and Nelson's queering of the literary narrative and maternal subjectivity. In concurrence, Pearl suggests that like Nelson's '*Argo* and its commutable parts, once we have an idea of the genre – even an innovation of a genre – it can do almost anything and still be that name'.[613] The genre attributed to the work acts as a 'kind of place-holder – a nominative, like *Argo*, willing to designate molten or shifting parts'.[614]

Through this understanding, the maternal texts queer the genre they write within by using a range of contra-standard features and becoming a truly hybrid piece of writing. Of Nelson's work, Silbergleid states that it 'refuses genre, or alternatively, is such a hybrid thing, a trans thing, that it defies easy classification. It is memoir and poetry, criticism and personal essay, series of fragments and book-length work.' For Nelson, the written maternal narrative *must* defy generic classification as it cannot find an adequate form for its subjective experience within restricted understanding of genre. Throughout the text Nelson rebels against existing structures and literary dichotomies to create a work which echoes her experience of motherhood, love, and family as queer. Recalling herself in labour, she recounts the urgent decision to 'rearrange the bookshelves [...] make things right': 'I kept sitting down to rest amid the books on the floor, arranging them into piles by genre, then by country. More pains. All these beautiful pages.'[615] Nelson senses she must literally rearrange literary form before her entrance into motherhood begins; the books are separated into pieces just as her body and mind will be by the maternal encounter.

Conclusion

All of the texts discussed in this chapter defy generic classification in a way that echoes the environment of early motherhood in which they are produced and through their desire to authentically reproduce the maternal subject in all her ambiguities and paradoxes. Although they fulfil many aspects of Summa-Knoop's critical-autobiography, they represent their own evolving form which is primarily informed by the formative maternal encounter of the protagonists and the writers. We might consider them to exist on a spectrum of hybridity, rather than as acquiescing to a single genre or form; although they clearly demonstrate a shared form among themselves, which is in the process of becoming. Like the maternal subjectivity they seek to portray, they are experienced by the reader as multi-layered, elliptical, fragmented, and non-linear, constantly

[612] Di Summa-Knoop, p. 10.
[613] Pearl, pp. 200-201.
[614] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 35.
[615] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 156.

throwing them off the subject and creating openings for new understandings. The parallel between the narrative they tell and the form they take is primarily what marks these texts as without precedent: not only does the literary matrifocal narrative remain underdeveloped, but these writers go beyond a rectification of this dearth to create a text whose style and form is itself maternal. Beyond this innovation, they insist upon a maternal narrative which has philosophical ramifications beyond the everyday or trivial, and in doing so, the texts represent an original literary form.

Conclusion: In a State of Becoming

This thesis has explored the dimensions of the maternal subject within an emerging form of maternal writing. It has conducted thorough investigations into elements of maternal subjectivity that have previously been neglected. It brought together portrayals of diverse temporal sensations within the maternal experience in order to theorise a fully realised conceptualisation of maternal temporality. It achieved this by moving beyond cultural notions of maternal temporality and drawing the maternal temporal subject back to an ontological understanding; this approach was guided by the depiction of temporality primarily within Denise Riley's *Time Lived, Without its Flow* and Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness*. These two texts are dedicated to the capacity for the maternal experience to alter one's temporal being, but the chapter also demonstrated a wider recognition within maternal writing that a shift in temporality plays a significant role in maternal experience. Therefore, a theorisation of the mother as an altered temporal being was needed and this is what the chapter produced. It worked through Martin Heidegger's theoretical conclusions on the nature of temporality as fundamental to our understandings of ourselves as beings in the world and applied this concept to the maternal subject. It argued that through the maternal subject's renewed recognition of herself as a 'Being-towards-death', which is apprehended during the intense relation to the child, the mother experiences a distinct kind of Heideggerian 'moment of vision'. During the moment of vision, the subject separates from linear, sequential time and momentarily exists in a state of clarity beyond chrononormativity; this is a sensation shared by the maternal subject during moments of significance, such as parturition, as well as in the profundity of everyday mothering. Ultimately, the moment of temporal dislocation experienced by the mother may provide a distinct experiential understanding and altered consciousness of herself as a being in the world.

While the first chapter in this thesis explored the persistent present tense of maternal experience, the second chapter cast its analysis back through the maternal past. It retrieved historic mother-daughter ambivalence and intergenerational trauma in order to demonstrate the manifestation of these factors in the current mother-daughter relations within the texts discussed. It found a reparatory theme within the texts; therefore, the chapter turned to Melanie Klein's concept of mother-daughter reparation. Through a psychoanalytic approach, it fully illuminated the enduring and paralysing physic connection between mother and daughter, based on unresolved infantile ambivalence, anxiety, and guilt. It returned to the origin of mother-daughter relations according to Klein and demonstrated that, in the case of the daughters and mothers within the texts, the 'normal' ambivalent development of the daughter in relation to her mother is exacerbated and prolonged by an extraordinary circumstance of inherited maternal trauma. It found that the maternal writers perform an imaginative return narrative towards their maternal past through these

texts. The chapter paired the psychic 'open wound' caused by the loss of the mother during infancy with the wound of un-mourned intergenerational trauma and demonstrated the journey to heal both.

Drawing together these explorations of the maternal experiences of interruption, repetition, alterity, and ambivalence, the final chapter presented a detailed analysis of the particularities of maternal subjectivity. It set out to discover the way in which the mother's developing relationship to her child affects a change in her perception of self, and how the mother feels about the psychological and somatic shifts created. In order to achieve this aim, the chapter returned to the maternal texts of Cusk, Nelson, and Manguso, but also called upon Kate Zambreno's *Appendix Project* and Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*. It discovered that the maternal experience provokes a reconfiguration of one's subjectivity and an unfamiliar apprehension of yourself as a relational, layered subject. Much of its analyses engaged with Baraiter's conceptualisation of maternal subjectivity as a subject-of-interruption, constantly in process, who is able to perceive herself anew. However, like Baraitser, it noted a discomfort with the association of motherhood with a linear transformation – the maternal experience being so resistant to teleology – and argued that maternal subjectivity must always be considered dynamic and shapeshifting because of the ongoing relation to the unknowable child. It invoked Nelson's notion of the Argo, as well as her perception of the queerness of motherhood, to present an analogy for the maternal subject; a way to describe something with molten, shifting parts.

Leading on from this discussion, the chapter arrived at the crux of this thesis: a demonstration that the content and form of these maternal texts represents the formation of a distinct strand of maternal writing and life-writing. In order to illustrate this argument, it paralleled the subjective experiences of the mother with shared features of the maternal texts in question. It theorised that the writers' use of fragmentation, ellipsis, and a non-linear plot echoed the maternal experience of interruption, repetition, multiplicity, and the ambiguous subjectivity portrayed within them. Referring again to queer theory, it argued that these writers are queering the narrative *and* the maternal through the creation of these texts. The maternal texts refuse to conform to a single genre, just as maternal subjectivity refuses orderly organisation, and this was demonstrated by an overview of the genres with which they share features. But these maternal texts defy classification through the very nature of their being and branch into literary territory unfamiliar to the maternal narrative. Ultimately, these texts are innovative in two ways: firstly, they insist upon a maternal narrative that not only delves into the philosophical questions produced by the maternal experience, but places these fundamental ontological debates alongside mundane, everyday maternal practice; secondly, connected to their first innovation, the text is formed by the maternal narrative itself, and this is part of what creates a hybrid and experimental form.

The maternal experience provides a vast mine of diverse sensations and has many possible meanings to those it alters; this thesis has worked to theorise a few of the aspects of motherhood which have come to light in its selection of maternal texts. Yet, the impact of motherhood on the

individual and beyond remains markedly unexplored. It will take considerable work to continue to excavate the mother from her long history of oppression and absence in academia and culture. By drawing upon philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literature, the maternal texts in this thesis delve further into the unmapped landscape of maternal experience. As the maternal narrative continues to evolve within literature, it will, in turn, inspire further matricentric research.

Bibliography

Aarons, Victoria, and Alan L. Berger, *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2017)

Albert, Elisa, *After Birth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2015)

Badinter, Elisabeth, *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* (London: Picador, 2013)

Baraitser, Lisa, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (Hove: Routledge, 2009)

——, 'Time and Again: Repetition, Maternity and the Non-Reproductive', *Studies in the Maternal*, 6.1 (2014), pp. 1-7

Barthes, Roland, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975)

Birksted-Breen, Dana, 'Peaceful Islands and Dangerous Jungles', in *The Maternal Lineage: Identification, Desire, and Transgenerational Issues*, ed. by Paola Mariotti (Hove: Routledge, 2012)

Brown, Ivana, '"Mommy Memoirs": Gender and Motherhood in Popular Literature', *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, 8.1 (2006) pp. 1-22

Bueskens, Petra, *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018)

Cain, 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

Cusk, Rachel, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001)

——, 'I was only being honest', *The Guardian* (21 March 2008), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/21/biography.women> [accessed 7 November 2019]

Davies, Karen, *Women and Time and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life* (London: Coronet, 1989)

Di Summa-Knoop, Laura, 'Critical Autobiography: A New Genre?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 9.1 (2017)

Dix, Hywel, 'Introduction: Autofiction in English: The Story so Far', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 1-23

Donegan, Moira, ''Gay as in Happy': On Maggie Nelson', *n+1*, 23 (2015), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-23/reviews/gay-as-in-happy/> [accessed 20 August 2019]

Douglas, Pamela, 'Milkmother Memoir', in *Motherhood Memoirs: Mothers Creating/ Writing Lives,* ed. by Justine Dymond and Nicole Willey (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2013), pp. 105-130

Drag, Wojciech, 'Jenny Offill's Dept. of Speculation and the Revival of Fragmentary Writing', *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies*, 56 (2017), pp. 57-72

Dymond, Justine, Nicole Willey, 'Introduction: Creating the Collection', in *Motherhood Memoirs: Mothers Creating/ Writing Lives,* ed. by Justine Dymond and Nicole Willey (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2013), pp. 1-30

Elkin, Lauren, 'Why All the Books About Motherhood?', *The Paris Review* (17 June 2018), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/07/17/why-all-the-books-about-motherhood/> [accessed 3 August 2018]

Ennis, Linda Rose, *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood* (Ontario: Demeter Press, 2014)

Freeman, Elizabeth, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, (London: Duke University Press, 2010)

Freud, Sigmund, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *Sigmund Freud on Metapsychology* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 251-268

Friend, Stacie, 'Fiction as a Genre', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 112.2 (2012), pp. 179–209

Friedan, Betty, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963)

Frye, Joanne S., 'Narrating Maternal Subjectivity: Memoirs from Motherhood', in *Textual Mothers, Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures,* ed. Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 187-201

Hallstein, D. Lynn O'Brien, 'Second Wave Silences and Third Wave Intensive Mothering', in *Mothering and Feminism in the Third Wave*, ed. by Amber E. Kinser (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2008)

Hays, Sharon, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (London: Yale University Press, 1996)

Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962)

Heti, Sheila, *Motherhood* (London: Harvill Secker, 2018)

Hirsch, Marianne, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989)

——, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

Hoffman, Eva, *After Such Knowledge* (London: Vintage, 2004)

Irigaray, Luce, 'A Very Black Sexuality?', in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 66-73

——, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985)

Jouve, Nicole Ward, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography*, (London: Routledge, 1991)

Juhasz, Suzanne, 'Mother-Writing and the Narrative of Maternal Subjectivity', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 4 (2003), 395-425

Kawash, Samira, ‘New Directions in Motherhood Studies’, *Signs*, 36.4 (2011), pp. 969-1003

Klein, Melanie, ‘Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse’, in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 84-95

——, ‘Love, Guilt and Reparation’, in *Love, Guilt and Reparation, and other works 1921-1945* (London: Virago, 1975), pp. 306-343

——, ‘Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States’, in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 146-174

——, ‘Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy’, *Human Relations*, 12.4 (1959), pp. 291–303

——, ‘Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant’, in *Developments in Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Susan Isaacs (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 189-236

Knight, Zelda G., ‘‘If I leave home, who will take care of mum?’ Intergenerational Transmission of Parental Trauma through Projective Identification’, *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 40.2 (2017), pp. 119-128

Kraemer, Susan B., ‘“Betwixt the Dark and the Daylight” of Maternal Subjectivity: Meditations on the Threshold’, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 6 (1996), 765-792

Kristeva, Julia, Kristeva, Julia, ‘Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini’, in *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980)

——, ‘Women’s Time’, trans. by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs*, 7.1 (1981), pp. 13-35

Luscombe, Belinda, ‘Mommy Talks Back’ (5 May 2002), <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,235439-1,00.html> [accessed 5 January 2018]

Manguso, Sarah, *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2015)

——, ‘Writing Postpartum: A Conversation between Kate Zambreno and Sarah Manguso’, *The Paris Review* (24 April 2019), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/04/24/writing-

postpartum-a-conversation-between-kate-zambreno-and-sarah-manguso/> [accessed 15 August 2019]

Maushart, Susan, *The Mask of Motherhood* (New York: Penguin, 2000)

Moran, Joe, 'Walking with a Purpose: The Essay in Contemporary Nonfiction', *Textual Practice*, 32.8 (2018), pp. 1277-1299

Nelson, Maggie, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville, 2015)

——, *The Red Parts* (London: Vintage, 2007)

——, interviewed by Adam Fitzgerald, *LitHub*, (5 May 2015) <https://lithub.com/the-argonauts-diary-theory-poem-memoir/> [accessed 15 August 2019]

——, interviewed by Jess Cotton, *The White Review*, (May 2015) <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-maggie-nelson/> [accessed 15 August 2019]

Offill, Jenny, *Dept. of Speculation* (London: Granta, 2014)

——, interviewed by Ceridwen Morris, *The Literary Review*, <http://www.theliteraryreview.org/interview/literary-mothers-a-conversation-book-list/> [accessed 17 August 2019]

——, interviewed by Matt Pieknik, *The Paris Review* (31 March 2014), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/03/31/how-much-could-be-left-unsaid-an-interview-with-jenny-offill/> [accessed 17 August 2019]

——, interviewed by Angela Ashman, *The Voice* (29 January 2014), <https://www.villagevoice.com/2014/01/29/qart-monsters/> [accessed 17 August 2019]

——, interviewed by Anjali Enjeti, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, (29 June 2014), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/subterranean-lives/> [accessed 17 August 2019]

——, interviewed by Christina Fries, *ZYZZYVA: A San Francisco Journal of Arts and Letters* (10 November 2014), <https://www.zyzzyva.org/2014/11/10/the-philosophical-novel-couched-in-a-tale-of-marriage-qa-with-jenny-offill/> [accessed 17 August 2019]

Olsen, Tillie, *Silences* (New York: Doubleday, 1979)

Olsen, Ole Andkjaer, 'Depression and Reparation as Themes in Melanie Klein's Analysis of the Painter Ruth Weber', *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 27:1 (2004) pp. 34-42

O'Reilly, Andrea, 'Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers', *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, 10.1 (2019) pp. 13-26

——, Elizabeth Podnieks, 'Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives', in *Textual Mothers, Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures,* ed. by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 1-27

——, 'The Motherhood Memoir and the "New Momism": Biting the Hand That Feeds You', in *Textual Mothers, Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures,* ed. by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 203-215

Pearl, Monica B., 'Theory and the Everyday', Angelaki, 23.1 (2018)

Renfro, Yelizaveta P., 'How to Write Motherhood', in *Motherhood Memoirs: Mothers Creating/ Writing Lives,* ed. by Justine Dymond and Nicole Willey (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2013), pp. 48-63

Rich, Adrienne, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1976)

Riley, Denise, *Time Lived, Without its Flow* (London: Capsule, 2012)

Riviere, Joan, *The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers 1929-1958*, ed. by Athol Hughes (London: Routledge, 1991)

Robertson, Rachel, 'Out of Time: Maternal Time and Disability', *Studies in the Maternal*, 7.1 (2015), pp. 1-13

Rose, Jacqueline, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018)

Sedgewick, Eve Kosofsky, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993)

Sheehy, Maura, 'Writing of Mothers', in *Women, Mothers, Subjects: New Explorations of the Maternal*, ed. by Maura Sheehy (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 1-12

Siegel, Kristi, 'The Daughters Discourse: The Site of Motherhood', in *Women's Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism,* ed. by Kristi Siegel (Oxford: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001) pp. 1-35

Silbergleid, Robin, 'In Pieces: Fragmentary on Queer Mother Memoirs and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*', Genders, 1.2 (2016), <https://www.colorado.edu/genders/2017/04/19/pieces-fragmentary-meditations-queer-mother-memoirs-and-maggie-nelsons-argonauts#Endnote%209> [accessed 15 August 2019]

Stephens, Julie, *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking: Feminism, Memory and Care* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

Stone, Alison, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2012)

Suleiman, Susan Rubin, 'Writing and Motherhood', in *The (M)other Tongue* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 354-377

Tyler, Imogen, 'Reframing Pregnant Embodiment', in *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*, ed. by Sara Ahmed, Jane Kilby, Celia Lury, Maureen McNeil and Beverly Skeggs (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 288-302

Young, Iris Marion, *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing like a Girl' and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Zambreno, Kate, *Appendix Project: Talks and Essays* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2018)

Zwerdling, Alex, *The Rise of the Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)