

Maternal Subjectivity: Nurturing a Sense of Self

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This is half essay and half anecdote; I explicitly straddle the academic and the everyday before your very eyes. I defy the polite and coherent presentation of motherhood, which subsumes women socially and yet, I require a subjective stance that offers maternity as part of the package. The balance and the contradiction is something I have become very good at: I am a woman with a womb (that's how we are defined, right?) and a feminist who seeks to reconcile my passionate and creative mind with the notion of mothering.

At 27, I am asked: "when are you going to have a baby?" Time matters for a female subject: tick tock goes the body clock. People are watching: your body is an empty, decaying vessel and your fertility is floundering uselessly. Both are unfulfilled disappointments and your selfhood is ruthlessly implicated. However, up until fairly recently, I have been expected to remain non-reproductive. Since I started menstruating, my autonomy has sat very snugly within the confines of social norms surrounding reproduction.

Ann Crittenden argued that "[m]any childless women under the age of thirty-five firmly believe that all the feminist battles have been won" (88). This was the realization I had while studying my MA. I started to feel a niggling pressure surrounding the decision to dedicate the next seven years of my life towards the completion of a part-time PhD. How was I to raise a family, earn money and study? It seemed limiting and suffocating immediately, not the expansive opportunity it should have been. My profession and my

private life seemed incompatible. Ultimately, I came to believe that it was books or babies, money or maternity.

I voiced these concerns to my friends (all aged twenty-five at the time) and became frustrated with their casual attitude. This was the first time I became aware that both social and particularly intellectual institutions painted motherhood as a problem, or worse, a non-issue. One friend claimed that women could of course ‘have it all’, but she did not specify how motherhood and a career were to somehow miraculously co-exist. I felt disgruntled by the blissful ignorance that we had all maintained toward the daily reality of what it would mean to juggle being a feminist woman, an academic, financially stable, and a mother. This optimism denied the validity of my feminist ‘battle’: it silenced my fears with a thus far untested and idealized positivity. The social and ideological infrastructure did not openly encourage me to realize both a career in academia (by the traditional means) and raise a family—that is, with all the ease and grace of my friends’ disregard. I became one of Crittenden’s disillusioned exceptions to the rule and it was a lonely place to be.

Ironically, I was not alone in my isolation. Pregnancy and maternal subjectivities are largely absent from our public consciousness, except in strictly sculpted forms: the Yummy Mummy, the Neglectful Mum, the Earth Mother, the Evil Step-Mother, the Incestuous and Devouring Oedipal Mother. Need I go on? What these archetypes hide is something Imogen Tyler and Lisa Baraitser term the ‘unrepresentable and unknowable’: the sheer array of experiences during birthing or care giving for a child is declared an ‘obscene ‘open’ secret’ (1). Western culture has long smothered the ‘realities’ of maternity under the weight of socially-mediated forms of ‘Motherkind’¹.

Tyler and Baraitser, more specifically, describe the visual depictions of childbirth in still and moving pictures: the moment of crowning (and the moment of cesarean delivery) is politely avoided, supposedly to maintain dignity for all. Mother, baby and the audience are saved from embarrassment. The euphemistic camera angles betray a willingness to quite literally overlook the very 'openness' of maternal subjectivities and their vaginas (or stomachs). Although the 'facts of life' are told, they are imparted in a way that is neither factual nor life affirming: our public consciousness is thus birthed from and into obscurity.

It gets worse, I'm afraid. The term 'Mothering', when it is not being subjected to public censorship and cultural appropriation, is not even awarded the freedom of being a very spirited verb. 'Mother tongue' and 'Motherland' connote a fixed (though homely) location in time and space. The 'mother of all... parties, headaches, arguments, etc.' is an expression used to epitomize or typify. A 'Mother' is traditionally defined, as having given birth, which is specifically past tense. Consequently, another symptom of Motherkind is associated with stasis: she is the constant from which the self must separate if growth is to occur (even if we eventually come back to 'her' as a site of belonging). She must be total: 'Mothering' is not a volatile position of inward turmoil; she instead, sits as a shining example of origin. The 'Myth of Motherhood' is stability; a fully formed being creates another life and yet, humanity is far from humble in her presence.

We constantly use these verbal pedestals to rationalize maternal subjectivities, manipulating women into a predetermined form. For many women this sits uncomfortably and even damages individual perceptions of what it actually means to

exist as a mother-woman (let alone a feminist-mother-woman). This belief is a thread running throughout 'The Worry Box Project' devised by Irene Lustig. She invites anonymous submissions of concerns about motherhood². Lustig transcribes these worries onto scrolls and places them in a physical box, as well as posting the videos online, in order to create a very tangible and accessible 'taxonomy of our shared fears'. Lustig explains:

Our dreams often speak the unspeakable: will I love my baby? . . .

Anxiety -- both in dreams and in waking life -- seems to be at the core of many of our experiences learning to be mothers. The Worry Box Project began as an attempt to archive, catalog, and make visible the anxieties that we are so often asked to suppress. (1)

Ultimately, she seeks to challenge the dismissal of these fears as nonsensical and irrational. Mothering is, according to Lustig, a continuous coming-in-to-being. The maternal-self necessarily negotiates obstacles and learns to grow in response. Here, in the Worry Box, where Motherhood is no guarantee of constancy, the recognition of 'instability' is an ideal condition for enabling maternal subjectivities to morph and resonate with one another. Rather than depicting it as an isolated personal failure, placing insecurity as the focal point of a discussion about motherhood brings women together in a way, that myths surrounding what a Mother must be cannot. An intimacy is struck that no static and absolutist figure could provide for women who feel insecure about their caregiving abilities. Given supportive forum, these women express a self that is simultaneously singular and similar, at once individual and communal.

Nevertheless, the Mythology of Motherkind persists. Currently, most women experience maternity as a hiatus in their career. In England and Wales, there were 695,233 registered births in 2014 alone (Office for National Statistics). That's a great deal of maternal subjectivities that became associated with a break from work. To borrow from psychoanalysis (specifically Jaques Lacan and Sigmund Freud's teachings), they become the embodied notion of 'lack'³. Being castrated (also known as the awful affliction of being born with a vagina), Mothers are 'naturally' alienated from the phallic presence (otherwise known as the almighty penis) and are deemed paltry in the symbolic stakes. Our reality and cultural convention certainly favors relentless presence (i.e. erections, capitalist work ethic) rather than inconsistent spells of absence or, even more so, mysterious internal workings (i.e. maternity leave, female orgasm, pregnancy). Despite the plentitude of pregnant women, the statistics offer them no sway when facing scrutiny from a psychosocial modern world that still legitimizes a Patriarch and penalizes a Matriarch.

Comparably, Fiona Harper voices her own concerns about how mothers are represented: 'Pregnancy is often associated with a break from work, activities and daily life. Most articles discussing pregnancy and women centre on concessions'. It would appear that maternity draws women into a societal black hole and must be experienced as a disturbing fragmentation of the self (via various dichotomies, for example: body/mind, birth of life/ death of independence, whole/separate, self/other, maternity/work, procreation/productivity). Thus, from this perspective, pregnancy instigates a nine-month period of unreliable women in the workplace and an even longer period of inactivity once on maternity leave. In actuality, it is merely a 'lack' of substantial theory surrounding

maternity and creativity that prevent fertile females from being perceived as valuable social participants.

Although, many cultural activists, like Dyana Gravina, seek to fill the lacuna surrounding maternity. Focusing on work specific to the ‘extraordinary life-experience’ of Mothering, she turns this traditionally inactive part of a woman’s career into a hugely inspiring instance. Her website ‘ProCreate’ promotes the unendorsed work of mother-artists, through ‘activities [which] fuse diverse mediums, enabling the individuals to exhaust their ideas using an alternative approach of expression, creating business and lifestyle straight from their bellies.’ ProCreate is an artistic assembly where maternal subjects can access connections, cultural exchanges, rather than slip into an abyss of exclusion outside the respected realms of capital. Mothering no longer requires sacrifice when there is a supportive infrastructure in place. Rather than bow out of society during the most fruitful years of their lives, these artists have a dynamic collective presence because of their pregnancy. Together they represent a call to action. As Elena Marchevska suggests, they ask us to realize that “Motherhood is not a problem we need to solve; it is a reality we need to acknowledge.”

Gaps, lack, misrepresentational myths, visual and theoretical silence, isolation, and stasis: it looks bleak for maternal subjectivities. In spite of the effort of the aforementioned artist-mother-women, the reality of childbirth and Mothering remains partially ‘erased’ from our public consciousness. To borrow from Tyler and Baraitser again, motherhood remains firmly positioned in the realm of ‘Spectral Birth’ (3). Motherhood, as perceived through a patriarchal lens, situates women in a ghostly state, where the actuality of their being is denied. They are between the states of what is

perceived and what is experienced; they haunt the peripheries of our social vision. The specter of maternity is something we must engage with, if we are to free women from notions of pregnancy and mothering that so often subjugates them.

This aspect might be more successfully explored by borrowing from Victor Turner's theory of liminality. Like ghosts and, as I have argued, maternal subjects, Turner suggests that there are those who exist 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, [and] convention' (359). He believed that valued members of every society endure a separation (either chosen or enforced), experience a liminal period (undergoing a meaningful rite or transformation) and finally become re-assimilated within the accepted social order. This process might be ritualistically carried out in terms of spiritual or religious initiation ceremonies, a career adjustment or might be a biological and psychological coming-of-age, via the loss of virginity or menstrual blood. In every culture, maternity involves all of these transformations and more. Whilst the liminal stage may not be integral to our societal laws, by acknowledging the in-between transformative feat of pregnancy and mothering, liminality is a way to theorize maternal subjecthood in an expansive manner. Turner implies that the cycle between separation and re-assimilation is ever evolving, simultaneous and non-linear. Maternity, through the guise of liminality, is not a restrictive instance. It is a significant coming-into-being. Furthermore, Turner promoted the possibility of an alternative cultural system, where Maternal Subjects may thrive. He provides a fluid movement between 'two major "models" for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating' (360):

The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating [wo]men

in terms of “more” or “less”. The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated . . . community, or even communion of equal individuals (360).

This type of communion is the central premise of our previous examples. ‘Procreate’ and ‘The Worry Box’ both introduce a kinship, which challenges the totality of a rational system where Motherkind is based solely on structured and convenient myths. These women highlight their need for the second model in order to demonstrate the incompetency of the first.

However, I must ask that you straddle both models with me. We cannot settle, snug as it may be, in the idealized mode of the liminal; to be a self-declared union of equals is of no use if normative society will not accept us as so. In her essay, entitled *The Matrixial Feminine or A Case of a Metempsychosis*, Chrysanthi Nigianni, details Bracha Ettinger’s model of a ‘Borderspace’ (1) and offers the possibility of two co-existent modes of being. According to Nigianni, Ettinger ‘conceives of the subject-formation outside notions of splitness, castration, or separation’ and insists on the potential of ‘subjects-to-be’. This subjective mode does away with binary definitions of ‘self’ versus ‘other’ and develops a ‘matrix’ of intersections (1-3): I can become a woman-daughter-lover-mother-feminist-writer-white-heterosexual. My position is not fixed; it is recognized in the Matrixial Borderspace as being capable of reincarnation. Nigianni explains that maternal subjectivity reconfigured in this way, ‘crosses over the notion of stratified time and organized life, by putting into the game all the different levels of existence, the actual and the virtual, the possible and the impossible.’ (2) We are only

ever one potential arrangement in an endless configuration of arrangements; the next moment is another plethora of possibilities.

This may all sound incredibly feeble; it hardly provides a clear-cut concrete position for mothers who seek solace from oppression. Even so, maternal subjectivities are inextricably linked with previous generations, their own parents, genetics, inherited traits and family customs, as well as an unlimited matrix of their own experiences. Childhood imaginings, misremembered recollections, fantasies, conventions, anecdotes, conversations, all exist within us simultaneously and are intermingled with the 'politico-legal-economic' (Turner, 360) demands of our culture. As Mothers, we are at once the past, the present and the future. Maternal subjectivities are no longer fixed as an absence from the 'real' structure, but are competitors whose 'betwixt and between' experiences exposes the absolutist totality of ordered society as a fallacy. The effusive and expansive Matrixial Feminine teaches us that we are never fully formed beings. Instead of the subject being viewed as a product, we exist as a combination of ever-swapping intersections. No self or body is irrevocably fixed in the stakes of 'more' or 'less'. This type of communion is the central premise of our previous examples. 'Procreate' and 'The Worry Box' both introduce a kinship, which challenges the totality of a rational system where Motherkind is based solely on structured and convenient myths. These women highlight their need for the second model in order to demonstrate the incompetency of the first.

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I suffered a miscarriage in the autumn of 2014. It was an accidental pregnancy, which had my whole being doing a disorientating set of cartwheels. The strongest emotion I felt initially was shame; I was an intelligent and sensible girl but I had stumbled into the world of unplanned pregnancy. I felt like a naughty teenager who had let everyone down (I was 25). Despite my partner obviously having done his fair share, it was somehow entirely my fault. In terms of Turner's first model of society, the 'structured, differentiated, and [...] hierarchical system' (360), I felt that I was instantly worth 'less' in terms of my moral standing. My conscience was crippled with patronizing voices of the past, forcing me to believe that because I still lived at home, was unmarried and had not taken 'responsible' actions, I was a bad woman. I specify strictly a woman here rather than a person; I felt that a very integral part of my biological make up had caused my downfall.

Of course, I didn't have to see unplanned pregnancy this way; I would never judge another woman this harshly in the same circumstance, so where were these vicious thoughts coming from? One answer is that they came from cultural constructs fed to me from birth: assumptions made about the 'correct' way to live and love as woman in the twenty first century. An alternative answer is that the silence swamping unplanned pregnancies (and later miscarriage) allowed me to exaggerate my own sense of chaos. The fear of personal ruin was so isolating and given so much space that, like an echo, it

became distorted and menacing. As a result, I began to endure Turner's phase of enforced separation.

After suffering some serious cramps I was referred to the hospital, where tests were carried out to ensure I did not have an ectopic pregnancy. Whilst this was happening, I lied to everyone. I made excuses to family and work about where I was. Eventually, it was discovered that I was pregnant with a blighted ovum and no fetus would ever develop. They wanted me to miscarry naturally. As it was a secret, I worked for the majority of the pregnancy loss. Apart from being pale and admitting that I was excruciatingly tired, the secret remained strong. I became withdrawn. Psychologically, I felt separated from my friends and family. Life as a healthy adult was moving just beyond my grasp. I even became distant and resentful towards my partner: all that pain and he didn't have to deal with any of it, if he didn't want to.

As the miscarriage progressed, I entered the liminal stage of Turner's theory. In light of Turner's second model of society, I survived through what seemed 'an unstructured or [...] relatively undifferentiated' period, where my mind and body were melded in one almighty effort (360). My miscarriage was effusive in every sense; bleeding what seemed like endless amounts of blood, my insides were exposed to a room of strangers via internal scans and my propriety melted to the floor to be found somewhere beside my knickers. Liminality, in this sense, was not an experience of unbound joy; I did not revel in the lack of boundaries felt at this juncture. Instead, I drifted uncomfortably somewhere 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 359) the emotional ordeal associated with any 'failure' and the orderly routine of medical procedure.

Once it was over (in writing that sounds deceptively easy) and my body was no longer ejecting the tiny piece of matter it had once sought to grow, I gradually began to re-assimilate. My mind and body had gained distance and I could reflect, rather than bearing the immediacy of the miscarriage's demands. Slowly, a realization took hold: I had been at the whim of my visceral body and became fiercely proud of how it had overcome the trauma of this biological cataclysm. Subsequently, my recovery transformed shame into anger. How dare my friends speak about pregnancy, when they didn't know the reality? It was really the self-imposed silence I was revolting against. When trying to formulate words that would encapsulate the complexities of my experience, my thoughts began to buck and bolt with all the unpredictability of a trapped animal. I wanted to lash out or state as bluntly as possible, that I had new knowledge and I was changed.

At this time, the liminal phase or the Borderspace, became known to me in a positive and enlightening manner. I started researching. I wanted a means of talking about my pregnancy and experience of miscarriage, which enabled me to step out of the silence and prevent the trite exclamations of sympathy that it so often induces. I wanted something that appealed to my creative and feminist sense of understanding, my explosive urge to talk about my new subjective position, without any sense of psychoanalytical fragmentation or engulfing sadness. I felt the need to highlight my perspective shift, which traditionally, would have been signaled by the entry of a new tiny human being into a mother's world.

After the miscarriage, my subjectivity did not return to a static position; my memory will never allow me to un-know and un-feel the experience of maternity

(however miniscule my time as a pregnant woman may have been). Not only has this brush with motherhood changed my subjective stance for the present, it may be relevant in different ways in the future, for instance if I fall pregnant again. Liminality affords me the freedom to define my miscarriage beyond any finality. As a result, we must acknowledge that nurturing a sense of self is a tireless process: maternal subjects must labour to thrive beyond the limitations set upon their endless potential for growth. Every person must be supported to voice their own version of motherhood, mapping the vast expansion of their own idiosyncratic matrix. By populating the silence with individual accounts, Motherhood is reborn. I offer up mine to the cause. Ultimately, we will show that our being does not comply with neat circumscription and neither should our uteri.

Notes

1. I will hereafter use the term 'Motherkind' (of my own coinage) to denote the pejorative and limited depiction of Mothers detailed throughout this paper.
2. Begrudgingly, I must admit that the anonymity aspect of this project, whilst encouraging women to speak out, seemingly keeps the 'obscene secret' concealed. It might be argued that anonymous entries are as opaque as the myths depicting Motherkind, but I believe that it actually enables women to overcome classification of their personage; their fears become heard and they avoid being labeled. No shame can be assigned.
3. Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan both associate the notion of 'lack', whether physical or symbolic, with the Mother/female as opposed to the 'whole' Father figure. There is a wonderfully concise explanation of Freud and Lacan's main principles in *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* by Mary Klages.

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