

The Gift: Matricentric Feminism, Physiological Mothering, and Art Practice

In this article, I explain how the specific politics of mothering shaped my understanding and approach to feminism and how I engage with these ideas in my art practice. I discuss two of my artworks and outline how these works function as tangible realizations of matricentric feminist concepts, specifically the invisibility and disparagement of motherwork and the mother-baby dyad. I suggest how the specific use of the ceramic material creates layered meanings and how my artworks function as concrete objects that speak about intangible ideas.

In addition to this, I examine my mother's mothering practice and how she and my father unintentionally raised their children in a matricentric feminist manner. I contend that growing up in a family that respected, protected, and supported the mother-baby dyad laid the groundwork for me to achieve empowered mothering. I extend this analysis to my own marriage and assert that the re-establishing of subjectivity necessitated by physiological mothering practices is beneficial to the entire family unit. Physiological mothering practices bolstered by matricentric feminism create a space for the renegotiating and dismantling of traditionally gendered roles within the family. I argue that by centring matricentric feminism in social discourse, this dismantling of patriarchal structures can extend throughout society.

My first pregnancy was dramatically unplanned. It activated a feminist coming to coming to consciousness within myself, meaning that for me, feminism and mothering are intrinsically, fundamentally and profoundly connected. When I finally encountered the term “matricentric feminism,” it felt like coming home. In this article, I discuss how my art and art practice materialize matricentric feminist concepts and how they demand acknowledgment of long overlooked mothering practices that centre on the mother-baby dyad. Additionally, I reflect on how my mother provided me with a model of empowered mothering and how having this model laid the foundation for me

to achieve empowered mothering for myself. Finally, I examine how this process has shaped my marriage and how the practice of matricentric feminist mothering creates daily opportunities for dismantling patriarchal structures within the home. When considering these issues, it is important to acknowledge my position as a white, cisgender woman in a heterosexual marriage. I cannot solve our society's problems from my own resources, and I will not co-opt the experience of my marginalized allies under the guise of elevating their voices. My work is born from and addresses the issues of my own experience, which though coming from the most privileged end of the marginalized spectrum is still marginalized. I acknowledge that nonbiological mothering can also be a site of empowerment; however, this is beyond the scope of my experience and, therefore, will not be discussed in this article. In the words of Petra Bueskens, "matricentric feminism is a gift to the world" (ix). My hope is that by making art about my feminist maternal experience and feminist female embodiment helps to dismantle patriarchal motherhood and to share the gift of matricentric feminism with all people.

In 2019, the mother role is more or less seen as optional, a nonessential role for society. Indeed, the attitude that motherhood reduces a person's capacity to succeed in the world continues to persist. This attitude is not completely unfounded; it is difficult to succeed in the West's nine-to-five capitalist patriarchy when you are the primary carer for young children. This situation is compounded in the art world: female artists are always acutely aware of the stereotypes attributed to women in this field. An artist colleague of mine once voiced the vague insecurity that she does not "make enough vaginas." Conversely, as an artist who tends to make a lot of artwork that references vaginas, I too feel that sense of insecurity in that I might make too many—rendering myself a specific type of artist.

The dismissal of this kind of heavily feminist and female subject matter is rooted in misogyny. Having a vagina defines an individual's life in a way that ownership of a penis does not—the notion that female biology is inherently inferior continues to persist (Braun 23). In this way, the repeated representation of the vagina in art, as well as other symbols of female biology, remains significant as a means to combat the erasure of women in art.

In *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985*, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock address the enduring struggle feminist artists have always had to contend with around visual representation of the female body. Imagery of the female body is fraught with the symbolism of patriarchal history, and as a result, the representation of it can be problematic. Furthermore, as society's understanding of gender identity expands, it is clear that being biologically female is not the only way to be a woman. Despite the many privileges of being a cisgender woman, this kind of body is still oppressed under patriarchy. By using one's own body in their artwork, an artist employs

a “significant psychological factor” that converts the body from object to subject (Parker and Pollock 135). In this way, to use one’s own female body in one’s own art disrupts accepted patriarchal modes of female behaviour, particularly in the context of the art world, where men are artists and female bodies are models.

This idea is accepted and even championed by mainstream feminism; however, the suggestion that the maternal body and experience are rich, diverse, and significant subjects for art making is not met with the same level of approval. As artist and writer Rachel Epp Buller puts it,

What sometimes surprises me is how difficult it seems to be to bring critical attention to experiences that are quite widespread: often, art around the maternal body (both by me and others) seems to be pigeon-holed as private production—in other words, if one is making work related to the family it must surely be only about one’s own family and not about any larger cultural issues that should be taken seriously. (qtd. in *Loveless* 5)

Maternal art, particularly imagery of a mother and child, is readily dismissed as sentimental and as lacking in critical thought. The attitude that mothering is an emotional and intuitive practice that does not require thought has long been held. Sara Ruddick’s concept of maternal thinking, however, challenged this attitude by asserting that mothers do in fact think and that mothering is decisive work with inherent political importance (24). Buller goes on to voice her interest in “the ways in which maternal perspectives might help us envision structural changes that could benefit all of us” (qtd. in *Loveless* 6), which is an interest that I share and see unfolding within my own work.

Matricentric feminist art practice requires a realignment of self-perception as an artist— where, when, and how I work. I work with ceramics, textile, photomedia, and video, and in addition to this, I make art from materials that literally would not exist if I were not a mother. *Becoming Mother: Baby and Me* (Figure 1) is comprised of my daughter’s umbilical cord stump and placenta; it is sealed in plastic bags and presented in a gallery setting. It is the literal connective tissue between me and my child: the organ that grew to sustain her and the remnant of the umbilical cord that connected us. This material would not exist if I were not a mother, and, therefore, mothering—and all that comes with it—has allowed me to make art that I otherwise would not be able to.



Figure 1. Allegra Holmes, *Becoming Mother: Baby and Me*, 2017. Umbilical cord, placenta, and plastic vacuum bags. Photograph by Meg O'Shea.

My installation *The Usual Work* (Figure 2) addresses and comments on the disparagement of motherwork and maternal perspectives. The installation is comprised of twelve stoneware plates, each hand built on a plaster mould made from casts of my maternal grandmother's dinnerware. Photographic decals of enlarged sections of images of my children cover the interior surfaces of the plates. Three platters hang vertically on a wall, one beneath the other, with thin brass plate wires curling over the rims. Beneath the last plate, a

forty-centimetre-wide table extends 1.6 metres out from the wall, and three cotton doilies (crocheted by my paternal grandmother) are draped over the table, with a stack of three plates placed upon each one. The images on the plates are of two distinct stages in my mothering experience.



Figure 2. **Allegra Holmes**, *The Usual Work*, 2018. Ceramic, photographic decal, cotton, wood, and brass. 240 x 160 x 40 cm. Photograph by Allegra Holmes.

On the wall, the plates bear images of my two children sharing a bath (Figure 3). On the table, the three stacks of three plates bear images of my then nine-month-old son, cradled in my arms alongside my exposed breast, after I have just nursed him to sleep (Figure 4). Many mothers share moments like these with their children, yet for much of society, they remain unseen. The images recorded on these plates are emblematic of the hidden maternal experience. To enshrine them on the plates is to bring them out of my memory, out of from the realm of the two-dimensional photograph, and onto the three-dimensional plate—a tangible object. The mould used to make the plates deteriorated during use, resulting in irregular and broken rims (Figure 3), which creates a sense of fragility, chaos, desperation, and tiredness, presenting the images as vestiges of times passed. In making *The Usual Work*, (Figures 3 and 4) I was tuning into the knowledge that this stage of my life, where I am a mother of young children, will end and that each time I bathe my children or breastfeed them to sleep, I am closer to the last time they will need me to do these things.



Figure 3. Allegra Holmes, *The Usual Work* (detail), 2018. Ceramic, photographic decal, and brass. 34 x 26 x 3cm. Photograph by Allegra Holmes.



Figure 4. Allegra Holmes, *The Usual Work* (detail), 2018. Ceramic, photographic decal, cotton, and wood. 34 x 26 x 6 cm. Photograph by Allegra Holmes.

The Usual Work emphasizes the reality of the maternal perspective. The images of my children are taken from my literal perspective at the time—my seat at the side of their bath and my view looking down on them when they have fallen asleep at my breast. The viewer is positioned in the place of the mother and witnesses the ordinary, routine, and daily work of mothering as it is performed. The installation draws on the notion of the display plate by mounting three platters onto the wall with brass plate wires. Their positioning on the wall, with their scalloped edges and the thin brass wire curling around their rims, evokes domesticity, tempered by the confusing partial images present on the surfaces of the plates. In expanding these photographs and selecting specific sections to display on each plate, the viewer's proximity to these moments of maternal work, care, and love is increased. The enlarged images focus on the shapes made by my children's limbs connecting, the patterns made where their bodies meet the water, and the tenderness with which the sleeping baby embraces the maternal breast. The images require thought and contemplation to discern what is happening; they force the viewer to spend time observing and thinking about maternal labour.

This work draws on ideas of high and low art, art and craft, mother and artist, utility and decoration, and the representation of the mother and reality of mothering. Plates are utilitarian; they are necessary objects used on a daily

basis and, therefore, are not considered art. Mothering is crucial to human survival, yet it can feel as though there is no place for the mother who does not comply to patriarchal standards or the requirements of liberal feminism. Within academic feminist discourse, discussions of mothering are also often overlooked. In this way, the plates are representative of the mother and mothering. Presenting images of my lived experience of mothering as art compels the viewer to engage in critical thought around these experiences and challenges the ideas of what art can be and who artists are. Through displaying images of my mothering practice—a practice that is informed and bolstered by matricentric feminist theory—I am resisting the patriarchal script that insists such practices are of no significance.

I assert that mothering practices stemming from the mother-baby dyad are inherently activist ones, as they directly challenge patriarchal norms. Western society insists on the male-dominated model of subjectivity that we exist as cerebral, disembodied individuals (Campo 54). Women can and do engage in this disembodied way of living; however, once one becomes pregnant, one's embodiment becomes unavoidable. Pregnancy begins the process of reconnecting the pregnant individual to their physiological body. The pregnant subject becomes aware of their embodiment in a way that they previously were not. As Rosemary Betterton explains:

Susan Hiller defines the “other” as those things against which we define ourselves. But what if that otherness is enclosed in our bodies, as yet unknown, neither friend nor enemy, growing inside our own flesh and blood? Such monstrous imaginings are the stuff of fairy tales and horror films, and yet, an ontological awareness of the body's alienation from itself and an emergent new relationship with an unfamiliar being is familiar to many pregnant women. (81)

To have the “other” within one's body is completely oppositional to the male model of subjectivity. Pregnancy involves a relinquishing of all prior understandings of one's self and embodiment. For many, pregnancy is the beginning of the mother-baby dyad, a dual subjectivity that is antithetical to individualism. It is a paradoxical experience accompanied by the persistent espousal of naturalness without any acknowledgement of the splitting of subjectivity. Mainstream discussion surrounding this split mostly focuses on resealing it, which creates a boundary between the mother and baby and enforces the idea of an individualistic identity. Proponents of attachment parenting advocate for practices that require removing this individualism. The issue is that even within these discussions of attachment parenting, there is still a language that suggests this stage is temporary and that one will eventually return to being a contained, solitary subject. I argue that there needs to be emphasis on the notion that mothering and parenting practices

that support the mother-baby dyad have the power to reshape not only our individual subjectivity but also society as whole.

Pregnant embodiment has an end date, which allows the opportunity to side step the challenge of re-establishing one's subjectivity. During my first pregnancy I spent much of my time looking forwards to my nonpregnant future, when I would not only have my child in my arms but also, supposedly, have the return of my old body, my old self, and my old life. There was no such return. Once my son was born, rather than reverting back to my old body, I moved from being a pregnant body to a lactating one with no official end in sight. It was this process of an open-ended approach to breastfeeding that required a true reshaping of my subjectivity and how I functioned in society. My last experience of life with a young baby was twenty years earlier, when my younger sisters were babies and I was a small child myself. None of my friends had children, and representations of motherhood in popular culture were unrealistic, misleading, and generally misinformed.

What I did have was a mother who gave birth to her first child in a mission hospital in Zambia in 1986; she went on to have four more births: a full term stillbirth, a Caesarean section, and two vaginal births after the Caesarean. All her vaginal births, including the stillbirth, were unmedicated. My mother breastfed all four of her living children to natural term; she also bed-shared and was a deeply attached and responsive mother. Although I have always had a close, loving relationship with my mother, during my first pregnancy, a veil lifted and I began to appreciate her in a new way. This feeling increased with the birth of my son (at which my mother was present), as I learned to breastfeed a baby that would not latch for the first few weeks of his life and as I grappled with extreme sleep deprivation for almost two years and resisted sleep training. My understanding of my mother deepened when I miscarried, when I became pregnant again, when my first baby finally, completely weaned after almost four years of on-demand nursing, and when my daughter was born and I became half of not just one dual relationship, but two. My mother has been my greatest advocate and champion in regards to my mothering experience. In a society that does all it can to keep women divided, the bond between my mother and me is not only a gift to my existence but also an act of resistance to the patriarchal status quo.

It is easy to assume that empowered mothering simply means that a mother should continue her life as it was before children, but the reality is far more nuanced than this. Matricentric feminism has intersectionality built into it; it acknowledges that empowered mothering depends on the context in which the mothering is being performed. A key aspect of matricentric feminism is the emphasis placed on the notion of empowered mothers raising empowered children. Andrea O'Reilly states the following: "The quality of the mother's life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her

daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create liveable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist” (24).

Liberal feminism would unfairly frame my mother’s experience as patriarchal motherhood, assuming that her commitment to the mother-baby dyad stemmed from internalised misogyny, ignorance, or a belief in gender essentialism. This is an overly simplistic interpretation and is the result of a culture that enshrines the male model of individualism and sees anything else as inferior. My mother left the workforce to stay home with her children for twenty years, whereas my father continued to work. However, my mother did not stay home to support my father’s career because he did not have one. Rather, my father worked long shifts, six days a week, performing manual labour in a vineyard to support the mothering practices they both valued.

In raising me and my siblings the way that they did, my parents gave us a model of matricentric feminism in practice as mothers and fathers. My father worked outside the home, but he also cooked meals, washed our hair, and made our beds. Our mother did numerous courses (eventually culminating in achieving a double degree in her fifties), she valued her own thoughts and opinions, as did my father. My parents made decisions about raising their children together. Although they had limited feminist theory to support this, their lived experience belied their values, which were inherently matricentric feminist, and bestowed these values upon their four children. As they both valued and considered mothering practices such as on-demand breastfeeding important, my parents worked to reshape their lives in order to protect the mother-baby dyad.

My installation, *Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum* (Figure 4), is a monument to this mother-baby dyad. It was part of my 2017 installation *Becoming Mother*, a significant body of work created during my bachelor of visual arts Honours year, during which I gave birth to my second child. In this work, a Perspex basin filled with just over four litres of my own breastmilk acted as screen onto which I projected footage of my daughter breastfeeding. Both mother and baby are visible in this video, as are the breast and the actual breastfeeding. There is almost a sacred feeling in this space: a gentle white light emanates from the milk, as it is illuminated by the video, which cuts out abruptly at the break in the film loop, leaving the viewer face to face with a basin of breastmilk.



Figure 5. Allegra Holmes, *Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundum*, 2017. Ceramic, Perspex, wood, breastmilk, and video. 120 x 100 x 140 cm. Photograph by Meg O'Shea.

The title *Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum* is a faux Latin phrase taken from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this story, all people are divided into castes based on their biology, specifically fertility, and their willingness to comply with the status quo. Women are stripped of all power, and the patriarchally instigated split between mother and child is made literal through the forced removal of babies from the women who birthed them. The television adaptation of Atwood's novel extends beyond the book and has become one of the rare examples of the strong, affirming mother-daughter narrative Adrienne Rich initially called for (qtd. in O'Reilly 23). *The Handmaid's Tale* not only acknowledges female bodily functions but forms entire plot points around pregnant, maternal, and lactating embodiment. The protagonist's love for her daughters is what emboldens her and gives her the courage to act in the face of unspeakable odds. "*Nolite te bastardes carborundum*" becomes a refrain of resistance meaning "Don't let the bastards grind you down." I chose to reference this in order to align the mothering practices I engage with in my work with the notion of rebellion.

In my research paper *Becoming Mother*, I address this idea of feminist rebellion as follows:

Patriarchy defines mother as inherently limited, imprisoned by her biology and oppressed by the physical realities of pregnancy, childbirth and lactation. Patriarchal control has colonised the female body,

particularly the pregnant and maternal bodies, in order to use them against women. This is evident in the limited awareness of the value of physiological mothering practices and the widespread notion that such practices are “problems” or “bad habits.” Systematic oppression is revealed in the near impossibility of engaging in these practices and functioning in capitalist patriarchal society. This same society claims the solution is to modify one’s mothering practice, again subscribing to the patriarchal worldview. This is the coming to consciousness I have spoken of earlier, recognising this inequity inevitably leads to a call for a restructuring of society. This is the nexus point, where the experience of mothering through physiological practices connects to the serious need to dismantle the patriarchy, and therefore explains how these practices are not simply matters of choice, but an opportunity to enact feminist rebellion.

I argue that this disruption of patriarchal expectation must also play out in the practice of matricentric feminist fathering. Earlier I acknowledged the privileges I enjoy as a white, cisgender woman in a heterosexual marriage. A superficial assessment of my lifestyle—in which my husband works outside the home and I work within it—would assume that patriarchal values govern our familial structure. Over the course of our relationship, my husband and I have continually examined and renegotiated our roles, which has resulted in a dismantling of gendered roles within our family unit while prioritizing the mother-baby dyad. Doing so has required a fundamental shift in the way that my family operates, namely the rejection of the patriarchally mandated gendering of work. In addition to his paid work, my husband performs a significant portion of the household labour and puts in a conscious effort to close the gap between us regarding the mental load. This shift in our relationship did not happen overnight; it took many years of discussion, therapy, fights, research and re-examination on both our parts. As we became unexpectedly pregnant with our first child after only three months of dating, the entirety of our relationship has been shaped around our experience of parenting, which, in turn, has been shaped around the practice of breastfeeding. The re-establishing of subjectivity necessitated by the practice of mothering, specifically breastfeeding, permeated all aspects of our relationship. I assert that in re-establishing my subjectivity as independent from the patriarchal model, it has opened an opportunity for my husband to do the same.

Throughout this article, I have discussed how matricentric feminism has informed both my art practice and mothering practice as well as the wider implications it has had for my life. I assert that mothering is a crucial component in the feminist effort to dismantle patriarchy and that by employing mothering practices that respond to the needs of the mother-baby dyad, one is directly challenging and rejecting the patriarchal status quo. My mother

enacted matricentric feminism far before she ever heard the term. She has showed me what is possible for mothering, for relationships, and for my life. By embracing the mother-baby dyad, my mother unknowingly unbound herself from a powerful facet of patriarchal oppression, and in doing so laid the groundwork for me to do the same. The crucial difference between my mother and me is that I have had matricentric feminist theory to support my lived mothering experiences from the start. Reflecting on my experience, as well as that of my mother's, has shown me that even though matricentric feminism has always been practiced by women and mothers, it is vital that it has a name and place in wider feminist discourse.

My art makes visible empowered mothering, rejects the notion that mothers cannot be artists and researchers, and encourages critical thought about mothering practices; it demands that society evolve its attitude towards mothers and mothering. Matricentric feminist art practice generates artwork that engages with the complex, paradoxical nature of mothering in a way that cannot be otherwise conveyed. A visual art practice that embraces mothering is a radical disavowal of the long-held attitude that to be a mother is limiting.

All too often, artist-mothers are queried as to how we manage to make art and raise children. To approach artmaking from a matricentric feminist perspective means that rather than limiting my art practice, empowered, feminist mothering has expanded it. It is the very thing that makes my art and research possible.

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