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# Love and (M)other (Im)possibilities

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Love and (M)other (Im)possibilities

by

Summer R. Cunningham

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Communication  
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
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## DEDICATION

To Benjamin, of course.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a performative interrogation of the disagreement and (dis)interest, communication issues, surrounding motherhood in contemporary U.S. culture. Textual analysis of Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document (PPD)* plays a key role in my inquiry. I juxtapose documentation from my lived experiences and academic projects with Kelly's work to build upon the themes and ideas introduced throughout *PPD*. This project is guided by the concepts *love* and *(im)possibility*, and I will argue that, together, they are central to understanding mothering/caregiving as a site of communication inquiry. Love and (im)possibility are inherent to both mothering and communication, but they also are essential for creating the conditions for new variations, ways of doing, and being with and for one another.

## PREFACE

Motherhood, as an experience, is both the result of social, cultural and political forces that are bigger than any one person AND simultaneously the result of a special and particular relational experience with another (and sometimes more than one) person. Being a mother who studies motherhood affords me a unique opportunity to think about motherhood structurally, theoretically, and experientially. I study motherhood both from within and without. I understand the various social, cultural, and political forces at play because I am an academic who studies them and because I have felt them in my body. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to point out that my standpoint is exactly that—not just a perspective or a viewpoint but a position that I stand in, live from, exist in. That is what motherhood is; it is not merely an arbitrary concept that can be held at a distance while we banter intellectually about its meaning. It is a defining part of life, *of being with and relating to others*, in our culture, and, thus, has implications for our existence together.

This project begins from that place of being, *my* place of being in relation with others in this world, others who include my son, my friends, my coworkers, and a myriad of other people and institutions with whom I engage daily. It is prompted by both the love and (im)possibility I have experienced in those relationships, and by the desire and hope to relate those experiences to you in a way that makes possible new ways of seeing, thinking, and being in the world together.

## INTRO: LOVE AND (M)OTHER (IM)POSSIBILITIES

*Dear Benjamin,*

*I've been writing little notes to you for as long as I can remember. Love letters, mostly, that date back to the very beginning of our relationship. I know I've never shown any of them to you, and maybe I never will, but, as is true of your presence in my life in general, this correspondence has been a source of both great revelation and great comfort. It has provided a way to document and memorialize some of our greatest moments, and, it has also served as a place where I can confess my dreams for you and also my guilt, my fears, and my imperfections.*

*I am writing to you now because there are some things I want to tell you, but I can't.*

*Because I don't know how.*

*Because I don't know if you would understand.*

*Because I don't know where to begin.*

*Because I am afraid I will say things the wrong way, and they will hurt you, and I don't want to hurt you.*

*You are the love of my life, a force. My experiences and relationship with you have taught me more about being a person in this world than any other activity in which I have endeavored. In knowing you I have found the strength to do things that I never dreamed I was brave enough to do, and I have been constantly pushed to grow.*

*You have been my partner and companion on journeys that span time and space; together we have crossed borders, oceans, and continents. You have taught me what it truly means to love and care, and have asked me to think deeply and thoughtfully about all that I do. You make me a better person.*

*For these reasons and many, many more, I am so grateful that you came into my life.*

*But your presence in my life has also created strife. It's not you, but it's not me either. It's bigger than both of us as individuals, bigger than our relationship even. But at the same time, it's your presence, our relationship, that at least in part produces the possibility for this state of being, that makes possible this particular existence: you make/made me a mother. And, how do I explain to you, my son, that I never wanted to be a mother. Because in this world, in our culture, being a mother makes me a lesser person.<sup>1</sup>*

*Please stay with me. I know this is confusing and maybe even hurtful—I don't mean it to be; I will try to explain.*

*See, growing up, I felt a strong conviction that I did not want to be and would not ever become a mother. My unplanned pregnancy at the age of seventeen was quite a shocking event for me, but what was even more shocking was that, upon this revelation, I experienced an overwhelming desire to maintain the pregnancy and to raise you. My decision seemed to contradict everything I thought I knew about my teenage self with regard to my wants and desires.*

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<sup>1</sup> Maushart explains, "mothering is the most powerful of all biological capacities, and among the most disempowering of all social experiences" (Maushart 472). Thus, being a mother has implications for subjectivity and personhood.

*Sixteen years later I am only beginning to understand the origin of this contradiction. My desire to not become a mother was never a question of not liking or not wanting to raise children; I have always liked children. The issue, I think, was that I really did not want to be a mother, and when you are a woman raising a child you have grown in your womb, a mother is what you are, what you become, isn't it?*

### **The Motherhood Problem**

This dissertation begins with the assertion that motherhood is a problem. This dissertation also begins with the assumption that a) while many members of its potential audience will agree that motherhood is a problem and understand why this is the case, many others: b) do not understand that motherhood is a problem, and, thus, c) would not agree that motherhood is a problem, and, also, perhaps d) might even be offended at the suggestion that motherhood is a problem, and, thus, e) would not be interested in reading the rest of this document if they ever would have started anyway.

Moreover, I assert that *assumptions a-e* exemplify part of the motherhood problem. Another assumption, *assumption f*, is that, regardless of whether or not we agree that motherhood is a problem, we probably do not agree on the definition of what motherhood is, nor are those of us who see motherhood as a problem likely to agree on *what* the motherhood problems are (*assumption g*). To summarize:

*Assumptions:*

- a) Some understand and agree that motherhood is a problem.
- b) Others do not understand how motherhood could possibly be a problem.
- c) Those who do not understand how motherhood is a problem are unlikely to agree that motherhood is problem.



d) Those who do not see the problems might even be offended at the idea that motherhood is problematic.

e) Because of *assumptions a-d*, plus other reasons that are not considered yet, many are not interested in reading anything about motherhood.

f) We (you, the reader and me, the author,) are very likely not in agreement over the definition of motherhood.

g) Even those of us who agree that motherhood is a problem, probably do not agree on *what* the problem is/problems are.

*Assertions:*

1. Motherhood is a problem (this assertion will be elaborated in this dissertation).
2. *Assumptions a-f* exemplify a major part of the motherhood problem; this part of the problem is of primary concern in this project.

This dissertation begins in the middle of all these assumptions and assertions, which I realize might sound quite confusing at this point. So, in an effort to clarify the aims of my work, I offer a discussion of motherhood problems to illustrate the various ways this subject can be and has been approached, which in some ways is quite different from the frame I take in this project.

## **Mother Problems**

The primary and perhaps most common way of looking at the motherhood problem is to understand it as *mother problems*. Upon hearing the phrase “the motherhood problem,” perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is a set of problems that mothers are confronted with on a daily basis in their efforts to care for children; pragmatic and logistical concerns directly related to the occupation of mothering such as

nursing; caring-giving in its multitude of forms; manual, physical, and emotional labor; taxi-service; meal preparation (or for many figuring out where the next meal might come from, and how to pay for it); sheltering; clothing; educating; providing for financially; advising; guiding; the list goes on. These kinds of issues are part of the motherhood problem and merit conversation, scholarship, and often activism because they pose real challenges and problems in the daily lives of mothers. Scholars, activists, and feminist thinkers have devoted studies, essays, books, and even careers to addressing these kinds of motherhood problems. In fact, I will point to some of that work throughout this dissertation, and I will also work to elucidate some of these pragmatic and logistical concerns herein. However, they are not exactly or at least not completely what I mean to refer to when I claim that motherhood is a problem.

Framing and understanding caregiving issues as *mother problems* creates a certain set of (im)possibilities with regard to how we understand and approach issues connected to motherhood. On the one hand, this can be beneficial such as when it helps to point out various socio-economic and gender inequities. For example, scholarship and theorizing on mothering and motherhood, particularly feminist approaches, often situates mother problems within broader political frames. Feminist scholarship on mothering and caregiving does not just point out that mothering can be difficult and comes with challenges, but points to the fact that mothers---defined here tentatively, colloquially, and especially *normatively* as women who are the primary caregivers of children---in contemporary U.S. society are typically burdened with these responsibilities in ways that others are not. In other words, the fact that a particular group of people in society assume the majority of the responsibility for the laboring, care-giving, and upbringing of children in our culture *is problematic*, and the fact that

such labor is often solely the burden of individual mothers, many of whom receive little support, monetarily or otherwise, is also part of the problem that mothers face. Moreover, their exploitation serves and maintains several social institutions, power structures, and ideological discourses, the most prominent being neoliberal capitalism and patriarchy. Thus, the problem of motherhood can be seen as problems that mothers face, and can also be connected to the various ways in which motherhood results in the oppression and exploitation of a select group of the population, women, impacting their possibilities for experiencing subjectivity and personhood.

On the other hand, when caregiving issues are framed as mother problems, it is also easy to dismiss them as issues that *seem to* pertain exclusively or primarily to mothers and women. I stand with and have been enriched by the work of feminist scholars who have elucidated the relationship between patriarchy, capitalism, reproduction and the oppression of women, but those ideas resonate with me because of my scholarly areas of focus and because of what I have experienced in my life as a mother who is raising a child in this culture. However, I find it a lot more challenging to have a conversation about such issues with others in my life—academics, professionals, friends, strangers on the street—because they do not share the same experience, insight, or interest that I do. Moreover, many of them just do not care or see how any issues of motherhood might possibly pertain to or implicate them. Indeed, there is even disagreement<sup>2</sup> and disinterest<sup>3</sup> among feminist scholars with regard to the issue of

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<sup>2</sup> One example of such disagreement can be seen in the varying approaches U.S. feminists have taken toward issues of reproduction, particularly in the contrast between antinatalist approaches, where the tendency is to advocate for women to abstain from participating in childbearing and/or childrearing altogether and pronatalist approaches which often frame mothering and motherhood as sacred, empowering endeavor. Disagreements such as this can be connected broader disagreement among feminist thinkers about issues of sexual difference. The

motherhood. It is this widespread disinterest and disagreement, in addition to the political and material challenges of motherhood, that I am trying to capture with the term “the motherhood problem.” I do not believe we will ever truly address the “mother problems” if we cannot find away to navigate the problems of disagreement and disinterest.

### **Disagreement and (Dis)interest**

A primary concern in this dissertation with regard to motherhood problem is one of communication and connected specifically to the issues of *disagreement* and *(dis)interest*. Jacques Rancière defines disagreement as a situation:

[I]n which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying. Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness. (x)

This kind of disagreement is perhaps the most complex form of disagreement particular to the motherhood problem, but it is not solely this kind of disagreement that is addressed in this project. That is to say, there is disagreement over what motherhood means, there is disagreement about whether or not motherhood is a problem, there is

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limits of each orientation as well as other *dilemmas of difference* are elaborated in greater detail later in this dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> For example, there are cases where feminist scholars, thinkers, and students dismiss or remain ignorant about mother problems because they have “chosen” not to mother, and thus neglect to consider the ways in which they too are implicated in the social organization of reproduction and carework. Examples of this kind of disinterest are addressed in this dissertation; for example, see Excursus 3.

disagreement over what the problems of motherhood actually are, and there is disagreement on how such problems, if they even exist at all, should be approached or framed. However, beyond these types of disagreement, there is added complexity when those taking up issues of motherhood, whether academics or two mothers discussing daycare over coffee, do not realize that they disagree about meanings, problems, and framing. Thus, I offer examples, variations, and refrains of the multiple facets of disagreement throughout.

Beyond the issue of disagreement there is the issue of *(dis)interest*. Similar to the concept of *disagreement*, *interest* is a word rich with complexity and polysemy, and issues of interest come into play in multiple ways with regard to the motherhood problem. One obvious issue of interest in the motherhood problem is that there are many who do not understand or see that they (should) have an interest in motherhood, despite the fact that motherhood is a socio-political construct that impacts all members of the culture at some level, if to varying degrees, to the extent that it regulates the way we organize (re)production and caregiving relationships. Yet, if only a select portion of the population is interested in the motherhood problem, it is unlikely that there will be any significant change in current arrangements. In the preface to *Postmodern Fables*, Lyotard takes up the issue of *interest(ing)*, explaining, “As an adjective, it does not signify what interests, but rather what could procure an interest, in a given case” (Lyotard 49). Thus the motherhood problem is a communicative situation in which there is a need to procure the interest of the disinterested.

It becomes helpful to consider that communication works to procure interest in two different ways. The first way of procurement is suggested by the adjective interesting. If something is interesting, it suggests that it garners interest. Garnering

and eventually procuring interest, however, involves more than simply getting someone's attention, although getting attention might be an important aspect of procuring interest. Once an initial interest is garnered, that is not enough. To retain interest, those who are disinterested will need to understand the complicated ways in which motherhood is particularly of interest to them, in which they have a stake or interest. As feminist theorist and philosopher Patrice DiQuinzio explains,

[B]eing a mother and being mothered are both imbued with tremendous social, cultural, political, economic, psychological, and personal significance. Everyone has a stake in the social organization of mothering, but these stakes can vary greatly. Although few persons share exactly the same position with respect to mothering, none has an unconflicted relationship to it. (viii)

Whether they see it or not, everyone has an interest in motherhood to the extent that motherhood is serving her or him in some way, but interest will vary from person to person. Indeed, certain, people, institutions and discourses—for one reason or another—actually have an interest in muting, silencing, and ignoring conversations about motherhood. In other words, garnering and maintaining a disinterest in motherhood also serves certain interests. In sum, motherhood is a both a cultural problem and a cultural production—an ongoing performance—in which we all participate. Yet, not everyone is aware of his or her role, not everyone feels that they have a stake in motherhood, not everyone is interested in motherhood, and even those who are, who feel they have a stake, do not necessarily agree on an approach to the problem.

The problem of motherhood is thus framed and addressed here as one of communication,<sup>4</sup> and, the “solution” proposed as one of communication as well. Therefore, this dissertation is an attempt, not just at revealing (communicating) some of the mother problems, or even one mother’s problems as I understand and have experienced them, but it is also an attempt to reveal (communicate) and to address (communicate) the problems of disinterest and disagreement (communication problems) surrounding and produced by *motherhood*. This dissertation is both an inquiry and experiment about the (im)possibility of doing so; a performative investigation into how to invite a critique of motherhood that also looks at how we use communication and performance to resist, transform, and hopefully, to love. In what follows, I explain the major theoretical concepts that guide this project, the compositional structure, and methodological orientation.

### **Love and (M)other (Im)possibilities**

The title of this dissertation is *Love and (M)other (Im)possibilities*. This title frames the project to highlight (1) the constitutive play between possibility and impossibility and (2) the epistemological relation between individual experiences of women who mother (as well as those who don’t) and the larger cultural practices and politics of motherhood. In short, this title suggests a multiplicity of concerns for exploring the constitution and experience of motherhood. The title is also significant to the structure and content of this project, in three different ways: it frames the issues

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<sup>4</sup> The motherhood problem is transdisciplinary, meaning that it can be (and has been) studied within and across multiple academic disciplines, while concurrently remaining a subject of discourse in contexts beyond the Academy. However, I approach the problem first and foremost as a communication scholar, and, thus, the way I approach/frame the problem as one of communication and my attempts to address the problem are also rooted in communication.

that will be addressed, it alludes to some of the key theoretical/philosophical concepts that inform and guide my inquiry, and it organizes the argument. I explain in more detail below.

### **First, There is Love**

Though the term love may hold different meanings for different people, love is first and foremost a relational concept. Moreover, love refers to a particular kind of relating to others; it is a reaching toward an other with the desire to connect. Similarly, communication is also about the various way(s) we connect to and relate with others. Therefore, I choose to frame this project with the concept of *love*, because I see it as a communication project that foregrounds the ways we might relate to others with a desire to connect. While a major concentration of this project will be about mother-child relationships, this project is also interested in the relationships that mothers have with various cultural others and institutions. Moreover, I am motivated by imagining new possibilities for caregiver-child relationships. Care, after all, is practically inextricable from love. In many ways care is the material manifestation of love, particularly when it comes to practices of mothering.

Aside from relational issues of care toward others, I choose love as a frame for this project because love is powerful. It is a productive and creative power; “an ontological force” (Hardt and Negri 194). For Hardt and Negri, “every act of love . . . is an ontological event in that it marks a rupture for existing being and creates new being” (181). Hardt and Negri offer love as a fundamental political concept for the possibility of global democracy; their concept *love* is given as a means for thinking about how we might *relate* to and *act* with others to produce new subjectivities and socio-political



realities. Likewise, Motherhood—as an institution, act, and relationship—is political and is concerned with creation and production of new being(s) and the arrangement of social relationships. Therefore, this dissertation is guided by and aligned with this political-ontological conceptualization of love to the extent that it will explore new possibilities for mothers, care-giving relationships, and subjectivity. In sum, *love* in this project should be understood as a particular relational/communicative *orientation* (connecting to/with others), a *doing* (a material practice of caregiving) and a *becoming* (the possibility for making something new).

Finally, love is complex. Anyone involved in a loving relationship might speak to this point. Love requires work, patience, and thoughtfulness. I approach this project and this topic in the same fashion.

### **Then There are (M)other (Im)possibilities**

This phrase can be read in several ways:

Mother Impossibilities

Mother Possibilities

Other Impossibilities

Other possibilities

I use this phrase deliberately, and risk postmodern parenthetical excess, to call attention to multiple issues surrounding mothers, mothering, and motherhood. For example, I will consider some of the ways that mothering (as a practice of caregiving and childrearing) often feels impossible to those who do it, but I also consider how motherhood makes other endeavors impossible (personhood, life balance, the pursuit of other/outside activities, occupations, and identities). Conversely, I also want to use this

project as a way to discuss and think about what mothering and motherhood make possible. For example, motherhood makes possible ways of relating to and with others, most immediately children, that can be extremely meaningful, significant, and rewarding. However, under the institution of motherhood these kinds of relationship and their rewards are available almost exclusively to women. Moreover, motherhood, presently and historically, also makes possible the oppression of women based on their biological capacity to reproduce<sup>5</sup> and perpetuates patriarchal ideals and values about family (and relationships in general), personhood, care, and social organization that are problematic for society as a whole, not just for women and children. To be clear, this project is interested in investigating *some* of those (im)possible situations in an effort to identify the circumstances (processes, practices, and conditions) that create experiences of impossibility, particularly as they connect to cultural conceptions and expectations of motherhood. Finally, the purpose of exploring these phenomena isn't merely to be descriptive or to serve as a point of consciousness-raising (although both of these purposes might be achieved), but to move beyond description toward new conditions of possibility; new possibilities for thinking and doing differently. In this sense, one goal of this dissertation is to attempt a kind of transformative, performative theorizing, while grounding it in both personal experience and concrete examples.

As with the concept love, the term impossibility will also serve as a conceptual frame for thinking about new ontological possibilities. Most specifically, I am thinking with Derrida's concept im-possibility, a recurring theme in his later work. For Derrida,

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<sup>5</sup> While there is no shortage of feminist scholarship on this subject, Rich and Beauvoir are the thinkers who first come to my mind, and whose ideas are at the forefront of the ideas that influence my thinking on the topic. Likewise, these two thinkers are foundational, each in different ways, to contemporary feminist thought on the topic of motherhood.

what makes the new possible (or in his terms, what makes an event possible—such as democracy) are not really conditions of possibility, but conditions of impossibility. I take as a point of departure, for example, Derrida’s claim, “For an event to take place, for it to be possible, it has to be, as event, as invention, the coming of the impossible” (Derrida, 90 “As If It Were Possible,” *Paper Machine*). It thus becomes easy to read motherhood as a curious kind of event that is both impossible and the creation of the impossible. What, then, might such impossibility make possible?

Finally, like motherhood and perhaps love, communication also can be defined by a quality of im-possibility. As Jeffrey St. John explains, “humans fail to communicate far more often than they succeed,” and yet “the rarity of communication belies neither the ubiquity nor the stunning persistence of our efforts to communicate” (250). According to St. John it is “the rarity of communication,” the unlikelihood of realizing the possibility of understanding or connection, that prompts us continually to try and try again to reach toward one another. With communication as with mothering it is often the (im)possibility of it that compels our action and brings forth the event that was until now not possible. Thus, this project isn’t just interested in what communication does and/or how it works in connection to motherhood, but it is also interested in what *might* be. As Ramsey explains, “the practice of communication is one powerful manner of disclosing [the] attendant possibilities of becoming other. It is also a powerful way of explicating for ourselves and others what is blocking these possibilities” (16). I am interested in the possibilities created in and by communication, and I am interested in the possibilities created in and by motherhood. Likewise I intend for this dissertation to serve as a place where possibilities are explored and, hopefully, blockages—such as those caused by issues of disinterest and disagreement—are located and loosed. Finally,

because of the interplay of possibility and impossibility, of creation and constraint, I feel it is appropriate to play with, push, and bring into contact with each other various forms of composition in writing the dissertation.

### **Compositional Structure and Rationale**

This dissertation is at once a performance of the motherhood problems that I am interrogating and an attempt to think, write, and move through some potential solutions. The compositional structure can be understood in terms of musical qualities (refrains, variations, rhythms). In this sense, the composition is both a method and frame for inquiry that fosters an opportunity for the emergence, discovery, and creation of new ideas and approaches to the topics addressed. Thus, I intentionally and experimentally employ a variety of writing styles and techniques including documentation, textual analysis, personal narrative, conceptual writing and theorizing throughout this performative text.

Textual analysis of Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document (PPD)* plays a key role in my inquiry. I choose to work through this text because this multi-year, multi-part artwork performs a task very similar to the one I am attempting to execute within my project: it performs a revealing of complexity of the experience of mother(hood), simultaneously revealing mother problems, critiquing the institution of motherhood, all the while demonstrating the complex and intimate aspects of the mother-child relationship. Similar to my work, Kelly's piece was constructed from the place of her experience as a mother and a feminist. Thus, like my project, *PPD* is critical, feminist and creative. I juxtapose documentation from my lived experiences and academic

projects to build upon the themes and ideas introduced throughout *PPD*; in effect, I offer a sort of “performative translation” of Kelly’s project.

I perform variations of translation throughout this dissertation. Drawing from philosophy of communication scholar Michael LeVan’s ideas on Deleuzian translation, I position myself as a mediator for Kelly’s work. My reading should be understood as “a creative enterprise, not a mechanical practice of tracing the representations of one linguistic system into another” (53). To be clear, my reading is not a deliberate untruth or misuse of her work. LeVan explains further the creative act of translation:

A translated text is never the same as the original, but that isn’t the point. The point is that the translated text is a new assemblage capable of new truths. It had to pass through a translator, which is to say, through a population of others. Translation produces its own truth – a truth in its own right – outside the polar concerns of fidelity and freedom that are always accountable to an original. (54)

Thus, I explain my position on translation to clarify my creative method of producing resonance with Kelly’s project (as opposed to attempting to replicate or reproduce it). Further, I engage with and build upon her project in my translation expressly for the potentially creative opportunities that might arise through such efforts—with the hope that perhaps my work and hers as well as all the other great works from which I draw upon in this dissertation might together, collectively, and performatively do something more than any of those works could do on their own.

Ultimately, this project is an extension and elaboration of the motherhood projects—academic and personal—that I have engaged in over the last several years. I see this specific project not as anything definitive or finite, but as a foundation for

potential future work in these and other areas of communication. As with my work up until this point, this current endeavor is guided by the concepts *love* and *(im)possibility*, and I will argue that, together, they are central to understanding mothering/caregiving as a site of communication inquiry. Love and (im)possibility are inherent to both mothering and communication, but they also are essential for creating the conditions for new variations, ways of doing, and being with and for one another.

## MOTHERHOOD

**1** the lived experience(s) of mothering **2** a relationship between a woman and her child; a co-constituted relational subjectivity characterized by closeness, dependence, care-giving, and love **3** a special kind of selfhood reserved for women, and only women, who give birth to and/or assume responsibility as primary care-giver of (a) child(ren) **4** “the *institution*, which aims that ensuring that the potential—and all women—shall remain under male control”<sup>6</sup> **5** a collective, cultural performance that produces subjectivities and regulates various forms of social organization such as the (sexual) division of labor and social relations such as family/kinship; a performance that produces both limits and possibilities for who and how we might be and become

*See also: **mother, mothering***

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<sup>6</sup> See Rich, *Of Woman Born*

## 1. THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

### 1. The lived experience(s) of mothering

Motherhood is an experience: the experience of being a mother. Experiences of motherhood might be joyful, stressful, wonderful, unremarkable, doubtful, confusing or all of these. Experiences of motherhood are particular and unique because each relational experience is shaped by unique set of conditions of possibility. Some of the particulars have to do with individuals who comprise the relationship—their likes/dislikes, desires, disposition, age—while other particulars have to do with the others who participate and interact in the lives of the mother and child(ren): grandparents, fathers, other mothers, teachers, friends. There are also conditions that extend from social and cultural circumstances such as the social status/privilege of the mother, her race and the child's race (they cannot always be assumed to be the same), class, education, and other more abstract factors such as social norms and expectations. Random events, chance, and time also play a role in structuring the mother's experience. Finally, although each and every experience of motherhood is unique, experiences of motherhood are culturally situated in milieus of shared beliefs, values and structures. Therefore, while the experiences are not the same, they are likely relatable with those of other members of the culture.

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The walls of the gallery—some of which are a gray, sterile concrete and some of which are a simple white drywall—tower beyond you and reach toward a ceiling of frosted glass that filters the natural light to a clean white. You cross the polished concrete floor, moving through the immaculate, expansive space toward the installation where you are first confronted with a line of several frames hung in succession, side-by-side at eye-level. They are not large frames, just big enough to showcase something about the size of an 8 1/2 x 11 piece of paper. But there are many of them—over twenty, maybe even thirty. The line of many frames extends the length of one wall and continues to wrap around the adjacent wall. As you step closer, you begin to make out the contents: each frame displays what appears to be a single Rorschach inkblot.

As you step even closer toward the installation, you realize that you are not looking at a standard canvas with inkblots. This is evidently a mixed media piece displayed across several plastic Perspex<sup>7</sup> units, each unit containing a single blot. The blots—which, based on their texture, are clearly not made of ink at all—are located on a textile-type surface; a white cloth that appears to be cotton. The blots are made from an unknown medium that varies from unit to unit: in color, texture, and size. They are comprised of muted earth tones, mostly. Lots of browns, though some have greenish olive-like hue. Others are a burnt to bright orange, while others still appear to be a mustardy yellow. And now that you are even closer, you notice there are words printed in typeface on the bottom half of each cloth. Indeed, the words are actually typed onto the cloth. Is it a list? No, a diary or schedule of some sort:

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<sup>7</sup> A Perspex unit is like a plastic frame to which a piece of paper or other flatt-ish type of media can be inserted for display.

FEBRUARY 2, 1974

08:00 HRS. 7 OZS SMA, 2TSPS. CEREAL

12:30 HRS. 4 OZS SMA, 2 TSPS. CARROT

...

It is a feeding chart.

It's at this point that you think to yourself, *What is this shit?* And then, you realize, that is exactly what you are looking at: twenty-eight fecal-stained cloth diaper liners. One liner for each day in February 1974.

And now you are confused. You are here to see an artwork by Mary Kelly titled *Post Partum Document*, a documentation piece about the artist and her son, that Kelly herself described as an “analysis and visualization of the mother-child relationship” (Kelly, xix). You were expecting twenty-eight instantiations of the kind of love found in the mother-child relationship, and instead you find twenty-eight dirty poop-blots hanging against the pristine walls of the gallery as if they were works of art. You don't want to see this shit. Probably no one does. We want to see twenty-eight glowing images of a doting young woman cradling an infant child who stares adoringly into his mother's eyes.

Yet what you are looking at—frame after frame, notation after notation, chart after chart—are twenty-eight instantiations of the mother-child relationship. Literally, twenty-eight samples of the shit that mothers handle daily, twenty-eight repetitions of the dirty labor that mothers perform repeatedly on any given day, twenty-eight variations on just one of the many mundane acts involved in mothering a child. And if care is the physical manifestation of love, then you are indeed looking at twenty-eight instantiations of love.

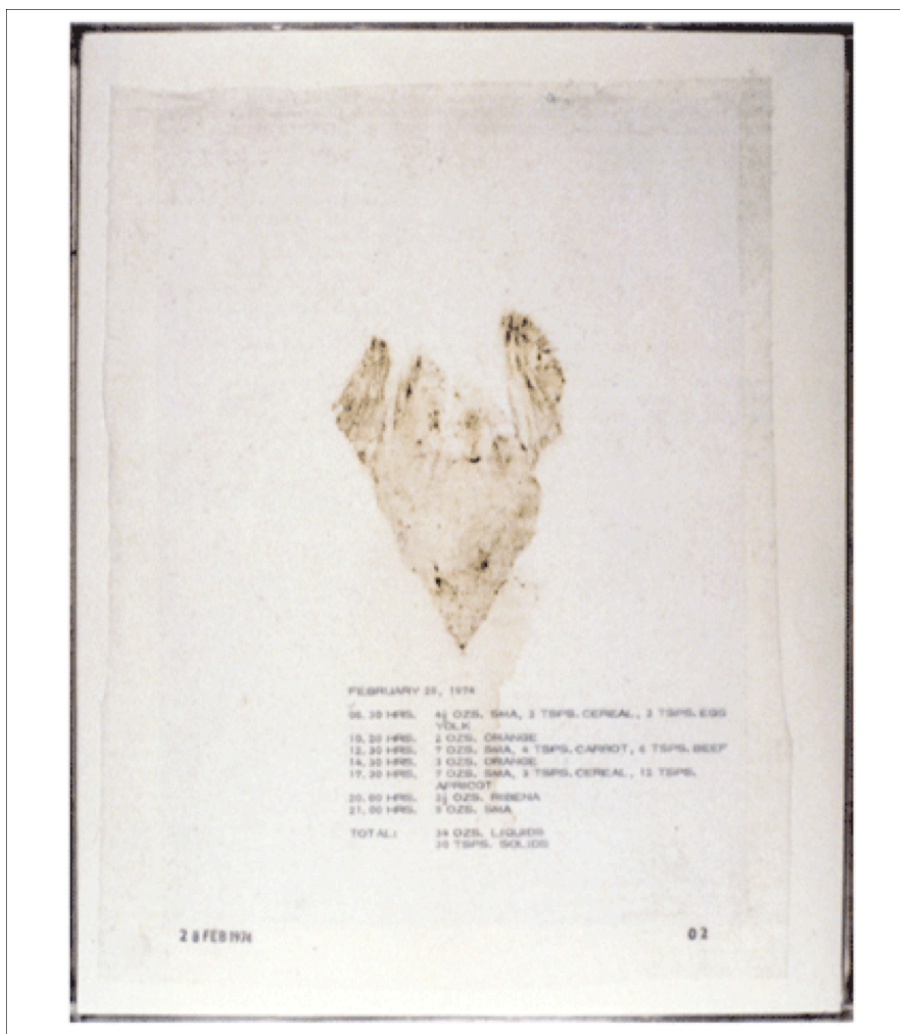


Figure 1: Sample dirty nappy liner from *Post-Partum Document*: “Documentation I, Analysed Fecal Stains and Feeding Charts,” 1974. Collection, Art Gallery of Ontario.

But there is a reason that you don't recognize what you are looking at as mother-child love. Perhaps it is because you haven't done this work, or are not a mother? Perhaps it is because it is not the normative image of motherhood—the masked and perfumed perfection—that you are used to seeing in artwork, film, and on TV?<sup>8</sup> Perhaps

<sup>8</sup> In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich writes: “When we think of motherhood, we are supposed to think of Renoir's blooming women with rosy children at their knees,” and then continues to juxtapose similar idealized images of motherhood with a series of less desirable situations

no one told you that mothering is often shitty and that mother-child relationships are messy.

As is this manuscript.

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*Dear Benjamin,*

*You nearly inhaled a quarter when you were two years old. We were sitting in the rocking chair in our living room, you in my lap, looking through a photo album of our family. We turned a page, and there it was: a bright, shiny quarter. You asked me if you could have it. I said, “of course,” assuming you wanted to put it into your froggy bank.*

*I don’t think you ever meant to put that quarter in the bank, but I didn’t realize that until I got up from the chair to put the photo album away on the shelf. My back was to you when I heard a sound that took me only a moment to place—the clang of metal against teeth. Strangely, it’s a sound that I recognized almost instantly even though it is not a common noise.*

*I turned and said, “Benjamin, what happened to the quarter we found?” You looked up at me from the chair, swallowed so hard that there was an audible gulping noise, and with big watery eyes and a satisfied smile replied, “I swallowed it, Mommy.”*

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actually faced by mothers, the things we aren’t supposed to think of” which include: everything from the unpleasanties to darker but real experiences such as pregnancies begotten by incest and rape and not choice, lesbian mothers fighting against courts systems and heteronormative discourses to obtain custody rights, the history of women of color being made to care for wealthy white people’s children while their own children are left without their mother, and so forth. For more, see Rich beginning on pg. 245.

*At first I thought, It's OK. Kids swallow coins all the time. I remembered swallowing a penny when I was five just because I was curious to see what would happen to it. Then I thought, Pennies are not very big. Quarters are huge. Benjamin is small. Oh my god, what if he didn't really swallow it?! What if it's still in his throat?*

*I dialed 9-1-1, and the operator was equally concerned about the size of the quarter. She instructed me to keep you in an upright position until the paramedics arrived and could examine you. The quarter might be lodged upright in your windpipe, she explained, and if you lay down it could shift and block your airway.*

*We waited an eternity of what in all actuality was probably only about ten minutes for the emergency responders. During that time, you remained entirely upright. I was terrified, and you shit your pants. Not because you were scared, but because you had to go and were still in diapers. Changing you was out of the question because it would've meant laying you down. So, the paramedics arrived to our house to find a child whose mother had let him swallow a quarter, but also then left her child to sit in his own poop. Up until that point, I had never felt so ashamed as a mother, so embarrassed and guilty. Who knew these feelings could exist while I was simultaneously afraid for your life?*

*I cried on the phone to Grandma Carol, riding shotgun in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. Meanwhile you sat in the back merrily singing "Even Flow" at the top of your lungs with the paramedics as though this were the best day of your life. It probably was: a fire truck and firefighters came to our house to see you, and then you got to take a ride in an ambulance with paramedics who rocked out to Pearl Jam for the duration of the drive.*

*When we arrived at the hospital they took x-rays that confirmed that the quarter was in your stomach, not your windpipe or lungs as was feared. Unfortunately for me, I spent the next two and half months checking your poop daily, per the doctor's instructions, to verify that the quarter had passed. It was the slowest moving quarter EVER.*

*I'm so sorry I turned my back on you. I'm so glad that you are OK. If you have children, I hope their potty-training is prolonged and that you have to change poopy diapers for at least a year beyond when you initially intended to because, well, karma.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

### ***Post-Partum Document***

Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* (1973-1979) is a conceptual artwork that spans the first six-years of her son's life (ages 0 through 5 years). It was initially presented in 1976 as an installation piece at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, and later published as a book in 1982. When *Post-Partum Document (PPD)*<sup>9</sup> debuted, the contents of the work, particularly the dirty diaper liners, stirred controversy. As Lippard explains in her introduction to Mary Kelly's book, also called *Post-Partum Document*, "When PPD was first shown in 1976, the atmosphere was such that the mass media made a huge fuss over the 'dirty nappies' and the mainstream art crowd denigrated the piece because it was just about a woman and her baby, thereby not

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<sup>9</sup> PPD is often used as the abbreviation for post-partum depression; however, post-partum depression was not discussed in medical and psychological discourse until the mid-90s and arguably was not made part of popular Western discourse until 2005 when Brook Shields became outspoken about her personal experiences. Thus, *PPD* when used herein and as used by the artist in the original naming and construction of this artwork is/was not meant to refer to postpartum depression in anyway.

a fit subject for high culture” (Lippard xiii). Motherhood, apparently, is not worthy of art.

This attitude toward motherhood as something irrelevant, unimportant or unworthy of study is not uncommon even among mothers themselves. In her research on mothering, Susan Maushart has noted similar sentiments. As Maushart explains, the “sense that a discussion of motherhood is either immodest or somehow peripheral and irrelevant reflects the feelings of deep unworthiness that women ascribe to their work, a belief that what we (mothers) do or fail to do doesn’t really matter that much anyway” (Maushart 16). However, unlike many artists in the 70s, including other feminist conceptual and performance artists, Mary Kelly believed motherhood merited examination, both as experience and institution, and, thus, *Post Partum Document* offers a critically complex insight into both the cultural performance and lived experience of motherhood, one that is still relevant forty years later. Through six distinct sections of documentation, *PPD*’s performance of motherhood at once troubles the larger relationships between mothers and the culture and reveals much about the lived experience of mothering. From the shitty work to feelings of guilt to the rich complexity of the mother-child relationship, *PPD* does the impossible: performs a critique of the institution of motherhood all the while honoring the beautiful and often trying aspects of the relationship.

### **Motherwork and Other Shit We Don’t (Want to) See**

The shit on the wall might be have been the first thing to get gallery-goers attention when they initially encountered the contents of “Documentation I: Analyzed Fecal Stains and Feeding Charts” (DI), but Kelly’s display was composed of much more

than dirty nappy liners. Her decision to include detailed feeding schedules on each liner and her analysis and coding of fecal stains is as much a commentary on motherhood as are the nappies themselves. The coding is reminiscent of the way researchers analyze and code other important scientific phenomena, and is thus a performance that attempts to legitimize the work on display against a cultural backdrop—art, science, academia, Western culture writ large—that concedes little value to the study of mothering. In this way, Kelly’s decision to code the dirty nappies is a proclamation that motherwork<sup>10</sup> is work that matters, that it is work worthy of inquiry and investigation. More precisely, she is showing us that this aspect of motherwork, the shit work, should be part of an investigation into mothering.

In his essay “Shittext,” Joshua Gunn advocates the deployment of what he calls a “coprophilic style” of public address as a means of countering the “hygienic apparatus of modernity” that “molds the subject in a *private* individual who represses the bodily in the service of a purified, public body” (84, emphasis original). In short, Gunn sees our societal obsession with hygiene, cleanliness, and waste management as mechanisms of

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<sup>10</sup> *Motherwork*, as a theoretical concept originating with feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins, holds significant historical importance in U.S. feminist and maternal thought. Similar to many of the key concepts in this dissertation, the term signifies multiple meanings. For example, in Black feminist thought the term refers not just to the day-to-day labor that mothers perform for their children, but also refers to the “work for the day to come” performed in particular by women of color on behalf of their “own biological children or for the children of one’s own racial ethnic community” (Collins, “Shifting the Center” 48). When I use the term here, I am not intending to invoke this particular line of feminist thought, but using it to refer to the mundane yet laborious tasks that mothers perform daily. That said, throughout this dissertation I provide examples of my work as a mother, which may intersect with the broader feminist ideas pertaining to *motherwork*, but I have not fleshed out that relationship in this particular project. For more insight about *motherwork* as a concept and feminist project of resistance see Collins 1994 and Collins 1999.



control, ultimately resulting in Foucauldian style self-surveillance and self-discipline<sup>11</sup>, and privatization. While Gunn's interest in coprophilia is rooted in a desire to counter neoliberal capitalism, the sentiment and politics behind Kelly's *PPD* are similar. "Good" mothers<sup>12</sup> are expected to keep things under control, to keep certain aspects of mothering private and to themselves, and to keep the dirty work and more negative aspects of mothering out of sight. Mothers are expected to present cleaned, perfumed children—and clean, perfumed selves—putting on a smiling face in public, no matter what kind of shit they are dealing with behind closed doors. Such presentations are actually part of masking the "dirty work" of childcare. Kelly's display of the dirty baby nappies is a direct defiance of this expectation. Gunn refers to the cleaning-up of the actual dirtiness that is life as "perfumativity" (Gunn 86). This reference to performativity is intentional; as with any performative act, it is via repetition that ongoing accomplishments of cleanliness, both visual and olfactory, work to constitute the normative bounds for what is socially permissible, and what is not. Similarly, Maushart refers to such performances as faking motherhood,<sup>13</sup> a masking of the parts of

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<sup>11</sup> In other words, we surveil ourselves at all times to make sure we are conforming to the order at hand and discipline ourselves to act in accordance with that order: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 202-203).

<sup>12</sup> The good mother is the idealized norm of motherhood in any given culture, and it is the standard against which mother's are a measured. These standards change over time and vary from culture to culture; see Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood*. A recent blogpost by Huffington Post writer Lynn Shattuck provides a nice example of how the contemporary ideology of the good mother gets internalized in the form of a 'good mother' voice: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lynn-shattuck/the-good-mother\\_b\\_3792794.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lynn-shattuck/the-good-mother_b_3792794.html)

<sup>13</sup> Maushart's conception of the mask of motherhood, and *faking*, in particular is similar to Goffman's configuration of front stage/backstage stage performances (See *The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life*). "The mask"—what Maushart refers to as the faking—is what happens on

motherhood that mothers are expected not to show. In essence, if mothers reveal the dirtier, shittier parts of motherhood, the culture at large might have to concede that not every aspect of motherhood is wonderful, that mothering is: dirty work, work relegated to a select portion of our population, work that is unpaid and widely unacknowledged. Thus, Kelly's dirty nappy liners point to the problem of masks and perfume: the literal hiding of shit makes invisible the everyday practices entailed in mothering a child. For Gunn, resistance to perfumativity means adopting a coprophilic style; it's a kind of resistance that is not a "refusal to work," but a popular proliferation of excessive bodily production" (82). It's a communicative style that makes shit public. Similarly for Maushart, transforming motherhood, unmasking as she calls it, is not a refusal to mother, but a taking-off of the mask in order to reveal of the fullness of the occupation and experience. As Maushart explains, "The struggle to unmask motherhood is the first step in reconciling reproductive power with social rights and responsibilities" (Maushart 480). Kelly's display of poopy nappy liners is an unmasking and a very literal example of this coprophilic style of public address, an unmasking that aims both to reveal and critique the contemporary organization of reproductive labor.

Displaying dirty nappies on the pristine walls of art galleries not only gives anyone viewing the installation a glimpse of actual motherwork, but also alludes that there is a mechanism of some sort in place that requires this part of motherhood to be kept quiet. It's a double pointing: to the motherwork itself and, equally as important, to the socio-cultural requirement for covering up motherwork. Gunn warns that the cleaner, more disinfected something appears, the harder at work are the mechanisms of

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the front stage; it is the socially expected version of mothering that mothers perform for their cultural audience. Maushart is arguing that keeping the other aspects of motherhood backstage is problematic.

control (Gunn 86). Thus, Kelly’s airing of the dirty laundry, er, nappy liners, is not just a revealing of some of the shittier aspects of motherwork, but also a revealing about the way motherhood works, and whose/which interests it is working for.

### **The Forces that Shape (Good) Motherhood**

Motherhood has not always existed, although it seems nearly impossible to imagine this to be the case. One reason it seems impossible to imagine a world without motherhood is because part of the function of motherhood is to mask the historical and constructed aspects of its composition. Motherhood, as we know it today, is shaped by a powerful and particular set of forces: values and ideologies so deeply embedded in our cultural framework that they appear natural, or rather, they remain so take-for-granted and thus we mostly do not perceive them at all. Understanding how these forces work in conjunction with one another is critical to understanding the particular characteristics of contemporary motherhood—as institution and experience—and also critical to understanding much of the disagreement and disinterest concerning motherhood problems. The way we understand motherhood informs, limits, and opens up different possibilities for addressing the motherhood problem.

Scholars across various disciplines, feminist and gender scholars in particular,<sup>14</sup> have shown that kinship and sex/gender systems—the ways we organize sex and sexuality, “family,” and reproduction of the culture and species—vary across time and from culture to culture. The contemporary system, which is regulated through motherhood, embodies some very particular characteristics, including dichotomous, hierarchical gender roles and heteronormativity. As gender theorist Judith Butler

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<sup>14</sup> Some important accounts include: Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women,” and, particular to motherhood, Shari Thurer’s *The Myths of Motherhood*.

explains, “To guarantee the reproduction of a given culture, various requirements, well-established in the anthropological literature of kinship, have instated sexual reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually-based system of marriage which requires the reproduction of human beings in certain gendered modes which, in effect, guarantee the eventual reproduction of that kinship system” (Butler, 524). Heteronormativity and “certain gendered modes” are not the only forces that produce contemporary iterations of motherhood. The other forces are made visible through performative critiques of motherhood such as Mary Kelly’s artwork, *Post Partum Document*.

In her introduction to the *Document*, Mary Kelly explicitly locates her project as a feminist critique of the contemporary sex/gender system, explaining that motherhood is a service of heterosexual, patriarchal and capitalist imperatives:

The sexual division of labor is not a symmetrically structured system of women inside the home, men outside of it, but rather an intricate, most often asymmetrical, delegation of tasks which aims to provide a structural imperative to heterosexuality. The most obvious example of the asymmetry is that of women engaged in social production or services who are still held socially responsible for maintaining labor power (i.e. males and children). But even more significant is the fact that nuclear family form, under capitalism, requires more participation by fathers and housework and childcare while insisting on the social sexual division of labor. The last stronghold of the heterosexual imperative is therefore infant care. Certain tasks such as bathing, changing and attending in the night remain almost exclusively female. Yet the specificity of this labor is

essential to the reproduction of the relations of production, insofar as the monolithic mother-child relationship which it welds becomes the basic structure upon which adult socialization is founded. (1)

In addition to identifying several of the key forces—heteronormativity, patriarchy, and capitalism—that shape motherhood, Kelly points toward the products of the culmination of these forces: the heterosexual, traditionally gendered nuclear family in which the woman/mother takes on all the labor associated with child rearing and the monolithic mother-child relationship. These products are also *requirements* for the maintenance and perpetuation of the existing system, sacred building blocks upon which capitalism and patriarchy maintain their stronghold. Given that contemporary motherhood is so prominently shaped by women’s labor under patriarchal capitalism, it becomes difficult to consider any critique of motherwork (reproductive labor) without thinking about the contributions that could be made through materialist, particularly Marxist, insights into the division of labor. Thus, I offer now a discussion of some the major Marxist feminist contributions to maternal theory.

*Historicity, Standpoint, and Structure.* Before I address the most obvious contribution of materialist feminist theory—the analysis of *sexual* division of labor—I want to account for some of the perhaps less obvious but equally important contributions. According to Nicholson, the greatest contribution Marx made for feminists is not his framework for understanding capital/labor relationships, but the way he offers the means to think “of social structures as not naturally given but as the products of historical evolution” (95). Thus, historical materialism contributes to a body of scholarship and theorizing that has demonstrated that motherhood (and other forms of kinship) is historically situated and culturally produced; if the current system has not

always existed, then we can begin to think about the possible transformation of the present social system. Marxist theory also provides the foundation for feminist standpoint theory.<sup>15</sup> This epistemological orientation is key to understanding motherhood as ideology and experience, and underpins much of the significant feminist scholarship and theorizing on maternity and reproduction.<sup>16</sup> Finally, as Hartmann explains “materialist analysis demonstrates that patriarchy is not simply a psychic, but also a social economic structure” (98). If motherhood is seen as socio-economic structure, it is a material condition that has material consequences for the women’s bodies that reside and work within the structure. Moreover, it also has implications at a societal (structural) level and not just an individual level. Motherhood, then, is not a problem of the individual, but a social problem that manifests materially in the lived realities of individuals within a society. Conceptualizing patriarchy and motherhood in this way also impacts the way feminist thinkers and activists are able to enact their politics. If a problem is structural, structures and institutions become the target for transformation. Likewise, if a problem is social and not psychic, there is a possibility to organize, a means for people to work together to counter issues instead of relegating individuals to deal with problems on their own.

*The Sexual Division of Labor.* For feminists, Marx provides a means of explaining, not the division of labor, but the sexual division of labor, thus feminist critiques of Marx have first and foremost pointed to the ways in which Marxism might

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<sup>15</sup> See Hartstock.

<sup>16</sup> For example, maternal theorist Sara Ruddick extends standpoint theory to argue that being relegated to a certain class position (mother) where one is required to perform particular kinds of labor (motherwork/caregiving) likewise produces a unique perspective and knowledge only possible to those who occupy that position and perform that kind of work; Ruddick refers to this ability as *maternal thinking*.

help us explain sexual inequality. And although some feminists have pointed out that such labor involves various forms of care work and domestic labor, the sexual division of labor itself seems to originate with the kind of work that is associated with the reproduction of the species, particularly because, at a material/embodied level, only certain bodies are endowed with the means to carry and bring forth new human beings (babies). This particular variation among members of the human species—that certain human bodies are capable of bearing the initial physical labors of reproduction (such as gestation and childbirth) while others are not—has become a significant point at which human beings have organized labor, social relations (in various ways but most relevant here would be organization in terms of gender), kinship and culture across time and cultures. Notably, the biological capacity of reproduction and the debate over whether the organization around it is natural or cultural leads to some of the most slippery disagreements surrounding the feminist theorizing about reproduction and maternity and also contributes to the invisibility of the historicity of motherhood. When the biological capacity to bear children is conflated with the perceived naturalness of gender, motherhood itself seems to be a natural state. The disagreements and issues surrounding this problem, referred to in feminist studies as the dilemma of sexual difference, will be discussed in further depth in later chapters, but I point to here reinforce my earlier thesis that the way we understand (make sense of) issues of reproduction and maternity informs the way we approach motherhood problems theoretically and actively.

*Separate Spheres: The Confluence of Capitalism and Patriarchy.* In contemporary Western culture, two forces that largely influence our overall social organization are patriarchy and capitalism—more specifically neoliberal capitalism,

which I will come back to after first addressing materialist issues. Marxist-feminist theorizing makes visible the relationship between capitalism, patriarchy and motherhood. Nicholson explains, “Marxism offers a powerful historical narrative about the growing separation and dominance of the sphere of the economy out of earlier social orders dominated by kinship” (95). Thus, motherhood in its current iteration is a reflection of patriarchy (the currently dominant sex/gender system<sup>17</sup>) and capitalism (currently dominant economic system). According to Marx, the capitalist profits by paying laborers a wage lower than the use and exchange value of the products produced by the laborer; similarly patriarchy benefits by paying *nothing* for the labor associated with reproductive, domestic, and other forms of motherwork. The work of laborers are exploited to benefit and maintain capitalism; the work of mothers are exploited to benefit and maintain patriarchy and capitalism when we continue that the production of new labor in the form of human bodies will eventually be used to sustain the capitalist system.

Capitalism and patriarchy have a fairly symbiotic relationship; they are both flexible in their means of exploitation and in their ability to adapt to one another. Despite the fact that early theories of materialism pointed to the possibility that women’s oppression might actually be ended by capital’s requirement for *everyone* to enter the workforce,<sup>18</sup> in the U.S. (and elsewhere around the globe), that has not proven to be the case. Instead, the two forces combine to effect the joint exploitation of the (re)productive labor of women. An early example of the confluence between capitalism and patriarchy can be seen in the development of family wages during U.S.

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<sup>18</sup> See Nicholson and Hartmann for different discussions of this theory.



industrialization when “male workers sought the family wage, wanting to retain their wives’ services at home” (Hartmann 105, also see O’Reilly, “Outlaw(ing) Motherhood” 371). As Hartmann explains, “In the absence of patriarchy a unified working class might have confronted capitalism, but patriarchal social relations divided the working class, allowing one part (men) to be bought at the expense of the other “women” (105). This particular historical moment has had far reaching implications for the gendered labor of caregiving of children to the extent that women in contemporary Western cultural are still predominantly responsible for the caregiving of children, even in situations where both parents work. Thus, if the mother isn’t herself able to directly perform childcare because she has work obligations, she is still the one responsible for finding and often times paying for someone else to do the work<sup>19</sup> This moment coupled with capitalism’s creation of separate spheres shapes the experience and discourse surrounding contemporary motherhood .

Capitalism divides life into two separate spheres; the public and private. When the worker is at work, her actions and any product of her actions belong to the capitalist. The things that happen outside of work, in the sphere of the home especially, are then the private concern of the worker. In this way, we can see how domestic concerns (such as childcare and the kind of labor considered to be the domain of the private/home), conveniently fall under the domain of the private, and become invisible in the eyes of employers (or, at least, can be ignored). The separate spheres arrangement has many implications for the study of motherhood. For example, we can see how such an arrangement benefits employers/capitalists and disadvantages mothers who work outside the home. Because childcare is a private issue and, from the perspective of

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<sup>19</sup> For example, see Brabazon.

patriarchal capitalism, a form of labor that does not come at a cost, employers are not obliged to consider the costs incurred—monetarily, logistically or relationally—when childcare must be arranged so that mothers can work outside of the home.

Contemporary, Western theorizing on maternity tends to take a discursive approach to understanding motherhood, but this contemporary work is clearly informed by the elucidation of power-relationships as detailed in early Marxist-feminist thought. So while Marxist-feminists laid the ground work for demonstrating how the confluence of both capitalism and patriarchy work to structure motherhood, contemporary maternal thought looks at the way discourses of motherhood emerge against a backdrop of neoliberal values such as individualism, choice, privacy, operate discursively to maintain the current status quo. This contemporary thought is key in helping us to understand what it means to be a good mother in this particular day and age.

*Good Motherhood.* Good motherhood is the normative standard for which all mothers, regardless of race or class, are evaluated in contemporary Western culture (O'Brien Hallstein 5). Thurer explains that the “the good mother is reinvented as each age or society defines her anew, in its own terms, according to its own mythology,” and goes on to say, “As with most myths, the current Western version is so pervasive that, like air, it is unnoticeable” (Thurer xv). That it is unnoticeable is key, which is why when scholars like Maushart emphasize unmasking—making the unseen seen—we bear in mind that the “truths” of motherhood that need to be revealed are not just the daily mundane realities of motherhood but also the processes and structures that require us to wear the masks in the first place. The contemporary iteration of the good mother in

Western culture is a form of *intensive mothering*<sup>20</sup> also referred to in maternal scholarship as the *new momism*<sup>21</sup>, and rooted in a neoliberal ideological framework that values individualism, choice, privacy and traditional gender roles. Feminist communication scholar Lynn O'Brien Hallstein explains the core beliefs of intensive mothering :

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, intensive mothering requires mothers to put their family's and children's needs first, always, before their own to be a 'good' mother" (O'Brien Hallstein 5)

Maternal theorist Andrea O'Reilly adds that "good motherhood is restricted to a select group of women who are white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, married, thirty-something, in a nuclear family with usually one to two children, and, ideally, full-time mothers" (*21<sup>st</sup> Century Motherhood* 7). In other words, the requirements for being a good mother are *impossible* for *anyone* who assumes the role of mother, but more problematic for some than others. Moreover, we can see how hard it becomes to voice complaints about motherhood when we consider how the three core beliefs listed above interact with neoliberal discourses like *choice*.<sup>22</sup> When becoming a mother is seen as an

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<sup>20</sup> See Hays.

<sup>21</sup> See Douglas and Michaels.

<sup>22</sup> For a rich discussion of the rhetoric of choice impacts maternal experiences, decisions and theorizing see Hayden and O'Brien's *Contemplating Maternity in an Era of Choice*.

elective reproductive choice, then any woman choosing this occupation does not have the right to complain about items 1, 2, or 3.

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The negative and controversial reaction to Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, to the open display of messiness, points to the limit of Maushart's call to unmask motherhood. All performances are subject to evaluation,<sup>23</sup> and performances of motherhood are no exception. In our culture some performances are more valued than others, while many other performances aren't "correct" performances of mother. Remember, O'Reilly explains that to qualify for a correct performance, one must be "white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, married, thirty-something, in a nuclear family with usually one to two children, and, ideally, full-time mothers" (*21st Century Motherhood* 7); if you do not meet those criteria, you are already doing it wrong. Thus, single mothers, welfare mothers, poor mothers, differently abled mothers, young mothers, old mothers, lesbian mothers, and so forth are already outside the sphere of performative correctness (i.e., invisible perfection). As was the case with *PPD*'s debut, unconventional performances of motherhood might be deemed unacceptable by large portions of one's audience, and might carry consequences for the mother that reach far beyond a scathing review of an art critic. For example, in a recent event in March 2014 when single and homeless mother Shaneshia Taylor left her children unsupervised in her car while she went into a job interview, a passerby noticed that the children were unattended and called the

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<sup>23</sup> See Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else* for discussion of the evaluative aspects of performances in various contexts.

police.<sup>24</sup> Taylor’s performance of mother was deemed unacceptable by the passerby and the police who responded to the call; she was arrested and now faces two charges of child-abuse and risks losing custody of her children. In this case, it is unlikely Taylor’s performance will be deemed acceptable when or if she reveals truth of her situation (she is single, black, poor—homeless, in fact; could not afford a sitter for her children because she had no income, and was, thus, seeking a job so that she could actually be a good mother and provider to these two children) during her trial. Is Taylor, given her particular race and class, even positioned to unmask motherhood when it is not possible for her to perform the expected role of “good mother?” Aside from the fact that she is already falling short of the good mother standard because of her race, class and material status,<sup>25</sup> she is also “bad” for not having a job. A good (single) mother should be employed so that she can provide for her children. Taylor couldn’t win: if she skipped the interview she would have been deemed bad for perpetuating her situation as an unemployed (single) mother; however, she is seen as equally “bad” for leaving the children alone in her car.

Situations like Taylor’s exemplify the consequences of “bad” mothering<sup>26</sup> performances, but also the structural/material (im)possibility of achieving a “good” performance. Simply mothering in a mundane, day-to-day context can pose a danger

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<sup>24</sup> For further details about this case and an example of how Taylor is framed in the media, see [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/07/shanesh-taylor-left-kids-in-car\\_n\\_5106065.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/07/shanesh-taylor-left-kids-in-car_n_5106065.html)

<sup>25</sup> “By virtue of race, class, age, marital status, sexual orientation, and numerous other factors, millions of American mothers have been deemed substandard” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 2). Also see Collins “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images” from *Black Feminist Thought*.

<sup>26</sup> For a history and overview of the making of bad mothers in the U.S., see Ladd-Taylor and Umansky.

for many (most?) mothers. We would be remiss to think that asking mothers to reveal “truths” about motherhood would come with no consequences, particularly for mothers who lack social privilege to begin with. Thus, it is one thing to ask mothers to reveal the reality of the work they are doing, but quite another to deny that there are social and political consequences to individual mothers when they choose to be the agent behind such revelation. Even mothers like Mary Kelly—who is educated, fits with most of the socially accepted standards for good mothering, and was already a respected artist at the time this artwork was released—are not free from good mother standard, but their privileged status might permit them greater room for less than ideal performances. However, the consequences for revealing the “truth” of motherhood will be quite different for someone like Taylor.

Thus, the performance of *PPD* raises a number of questions with regard to the motherhood problem, particularly when unmasking is proposed as part of the solution. For example, where will the dirtiness, the messiness of motherhood be accepted? Which representations and performances of motherhood are acceptable and which aren't? Which performers are acceptable as mothers and which are not? What happens to the mother who does the revealing? What consequences does she face? And should she have to face them on her own? Can a mother who is an artist, an artist who is a mother, ever be taken seriously? Likewise, can a mother of any professions, such as a graduate student who is a single mother for example, be taken seriously in her work? Especially if she is a feminist who is going to show and tell about what it is “really” like to mother? Or does one have to clean-up her performance and make smell good enough that so that others can handle it?

### Experiments in Voice and Visibility

In the introduction to *Of Woman Born* (1976), Adrienne Rich states that she “wanted to write a book on motherhood because it was a crucial, still relatively unexplored, area for feminist theory. But [she] did not choose this subject; it had long ago chosen [her]” (15). My feelings and experience on studying the subject of motherhood is both similar and different than Rich’s. By the time I began my project on motherhood—whether you consider that to be 1997, the year I became pregnant with my son, or 2007, the year I conducted my first official academic research on mothering—feminist theorists, thanks to the foundation of Rich’s important and influential work, had built an entire cannon of thought on mothering, motherhood, and maternity. Unlike Rich, I did not personally desire to write about motherhood; I was not interested in the issue as a potential subject of inquiry. However, like Rich, I feel as though I did not choose this subject; it chose me. It was out of the (im)possibility of my own personal experiences as a young, single mother trying to succeed professionally while loving and caring for a child on my own that prompted my academic work in this area. Thus, it was not just the struggles or impossibilities I encountered while balancing work, school, and life that pushed me toward this topic, but my relationship with my son, my love for him, that prompted me to think critically about what motherhood is, means, and does in the course of our lives.

In August of 2009, my son, my cat, and I moved 2600 miles across the country, from Tempe, AZ to Tampa, FL, so that I could commence my doctoral studies in communication at the University of South Florida. The move was incredibly hard on my son emotionally. He missed his father who resides in Arizona, missed Arizona, and missed the other members of my extended family in ways that seemed to be almost

unbearable to him. Prior to entering my PhD program, I had done a little research and writing about single mothers in academia. My interrogation into this area was rooted in my own experience, the shock of how challenging if not impossible it seemed to participate in academic culture while mothering a child. However, after moving to Florida I became even more acutely aware of the impact that my participation in graduate school was having on my son and on our relationship. The focus of my work shifted from merely trying to research and represent the constraints of pursuing a graduate degree as a single mother, to work that aimed to include, not just my son's experience, but his voice. He was affected by my decisions, my choices. This was his experience, too, and this part of the experience did not seem to be represented anywhere in the literature I was reviewing. I did not hear his voice or see his presence. For the most part, I did not hear the voices or see the presence of any children in formal academic settings.

Yet my son was with me, almost always, when I was at school, or at home reading, writing, and prepping for the classes I was teaching. When I say he was with me, however, that is kind of misleading, because there were many hours that he spent alone in my office on campus while I attended evening graduate seminars—most graduate seminars are offered in late afternoons and evenings for ease of scheduling; I suppose so that graduate students can teach classes during the day and take classes in the evenings. Unfortunately, childcare is not readily available in the evenings<sup>27</sup> and he was not quite old enough to be left alone when I began my program. Also, because he

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<sup>27</sup> One of the most frequently cited needs among student mothers is access to affordable, on-campus childcare that is available during the hours that students are required to be in class. For graduate students, this is often in the evening hours. For example see Lynch 2008; Medved and Heisler, 2001; Pearson 2010, and Vancour and Sherman, 2010.



was hidden away in my office, my peers and professors did not see him, nor could they possibly see that while I sat with them in class, was physically present, I was mentally focused elsewhere—constantly worrying about what this child was doing alone in my office. Was he finishing his homework? Was he eating the “dinner” that I’d supplied for him? Was he bored? Lonely? Safe? Everyone in my program, or at least in my cohort, knew I was a single mother. But they did not really know what that meant, they could not really see what that meant; the complexities and nuances of the actual relationship and the socio-economic and temporal implications of that position were not visible to them.

It was also the case at home that although Benjamin and I were together, with one another, there was often present a feeling of absence of the other. At home, much of my time was consumed with work connected to my professional academic pursuits, and Ben expressed often, and still does to this day, that it felt like I was there, but not “there.” He felt that I didn’t see him much of the time. It was the culmination of these relational experiences with my colleagues and with my son, as well as my interest in issues of voice and representation, that first prompted me to explore work with my son.

The work began with a couple experimental projects that included an interviewing project where we, my son and I, interviewed other graduate student single mothers and their children and a joint-performance at the annual conference of the National Communication Association (NCA). In a move similar to Mary Kelly’s in *PPD*, our NCA performance incorporated quasi-scientific graphs and charts to illustrate and legitimate the discussion and study of our experience of the transition into graduate

school.<sup>28</sup> For example, we presented line graphs to illustrate shifts in our relational satisfaction over time, and pie charts of our weekly time allocation. As you might imagine, our relational satisfaction took a significant dip after I entered my master’s program, but completely plummeted off the chart in conjunction with my entrance in to a PhD program and a move across the country. Likewise, you probably wouldn’t be surprised when you saw that Benjamin’s pie chart showed that he spent nearly twice as much time at “Mom’s School” than he did at his own. The graphs and charts did some nice work in terms of illustrating—showing versus telling--the realities of daily lives, but our performance, which was presented at a scholar-to-scholar poster session, didn’t seem to garner much interest from other academics or other graduate students.

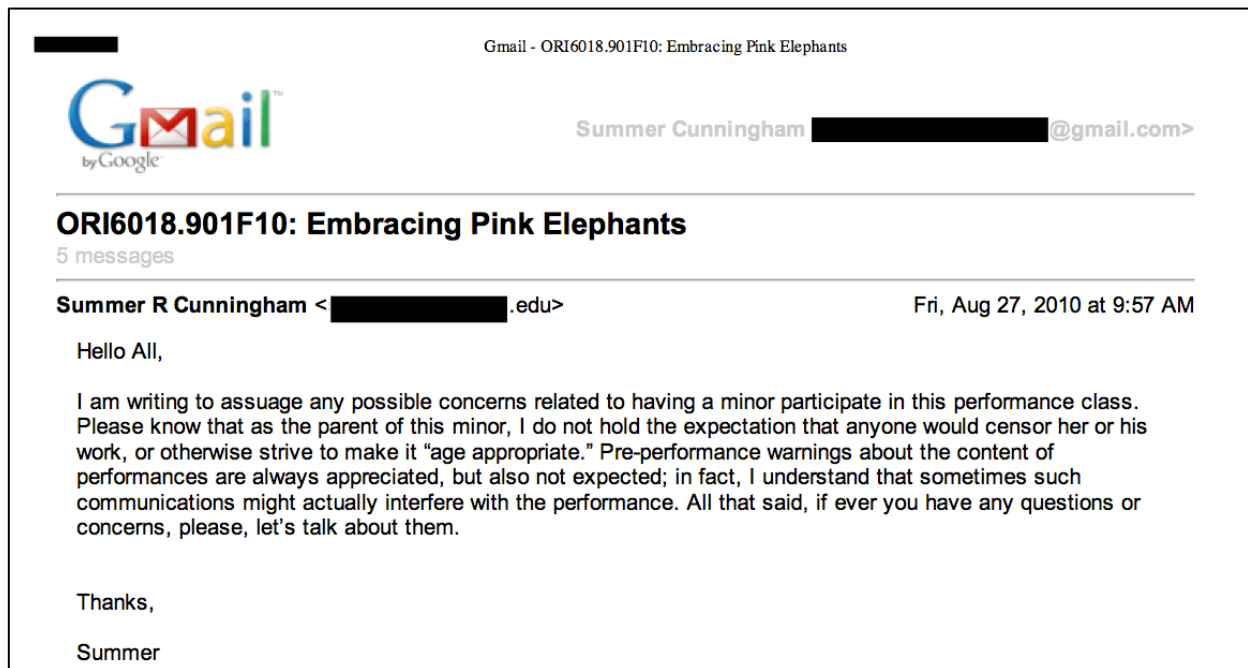


Figure 2: Email to our Performance Art class about Benjamin’s presence and participation.

<sup>28</sup> I would include them here, but unfortunately, they were saved on a flash drive that I left in the airport terminal on our way home from this trip.

In Fall 2010, Benjamin was invited by a professor in our department to participate in a graduate class on Performance Art. Benjamin was interested in performance and jumped at the opportunity. I also enrolled in the course. After the first class meeting, Benjamin's presence there raised more than a few eye brows, so I felt it appropriate to reach out my colleagues to get a conversation going about his presence and participation in the class (Figure 2). I received both supportive (Figure 3) and unsupportive (Figure 4) responses from my classmates.

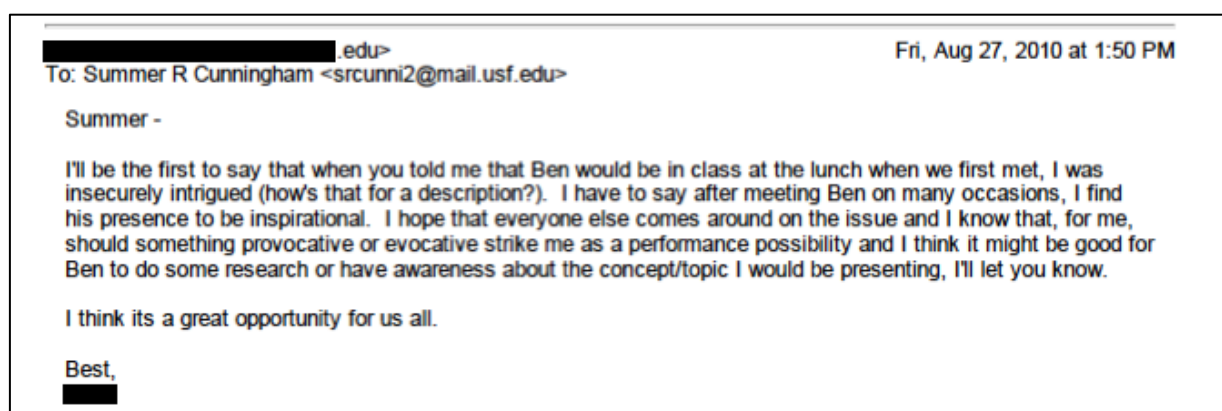


Figure 3: Supportive letter from classmate re: Ben's participation in the Performance Art class.

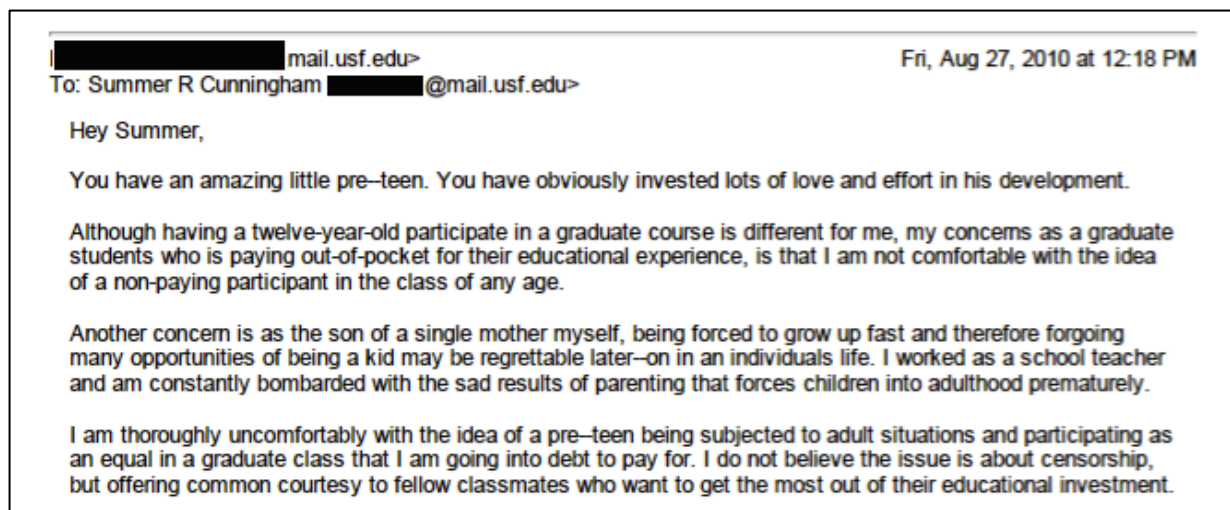


Figure 4: Example of unsupportive communication regarding Benjamin's participation in the Performance Art Class.

Obviously having a 12 year-old participate in a graduate level class was unconventional to say the least, and I anticipated that his presence would be met with controversy. However, what struck me as most interesting about the response in Figure 4 was the objection on the grounds that Ben could be exposed to things that would endanger his childhood:

Another concern is as the son of a single mother myself, being forced to grow up fast and therefore forgoing many opportunities of being a kid may be regrettable later--on in an individuals life. I worked as a school teacher and am constantly bombarded with the sad results of parenting that forces children into adulthood prematurely.

I am thoroughly uncomfortably with the idea of a pre--teen being subjected to adult situations and participating as an equal in a graduate class . . .

On the one hand, I could see how there was potential for Benjamin to be exposed to some mature content in a performance art class. On the other hand, I'd rather my son deal with mature content in the context of a classroom where I am present and can either: a) intervene in his consumption of said content and/or b) open-up discussion with him about certain issues that are a part of the world in which he lives. Whereas if my son were to encounter similar "adult situations" elsewhere in his life (say for example while he was sitting alone in my office surfing the Internet as I participated in this performance art class without him), I might not have the chance to intervene, explain, or provide him the context to help him process the issues. So what was it that made the possibility of exposure to "adult" situations in a classroom a bigger risk than exposure to "adult" situations in real life? It was as though this third party, a stranger, might be better qualified to determine what was in the best interest of this child and not me, the person raising him and who has a greater awareness of his limitations and sensibilities, or as though these performances were not going to occur within the context of a classroom community where we discuss different possibilities for

participation/presence. Clearly any good mother would not have allowed her child to be present for such debauchery. Notably, these comments that directly call into question my judgment and authority as mother occur after this particular student has first policed Benjamin's participation in the class by invoking an institutional argument about paying to attend that draws on neoliberal capitalist values of consumer rights. That argument also obfuscates the fact that this student would leave the class with what he actually purchased, academic credit, while Benjamin's take-away from the course would merely be (invaluable) experience. This particular response prompted me to add a more detailed addendum to my original letter to our class (Figure 5):

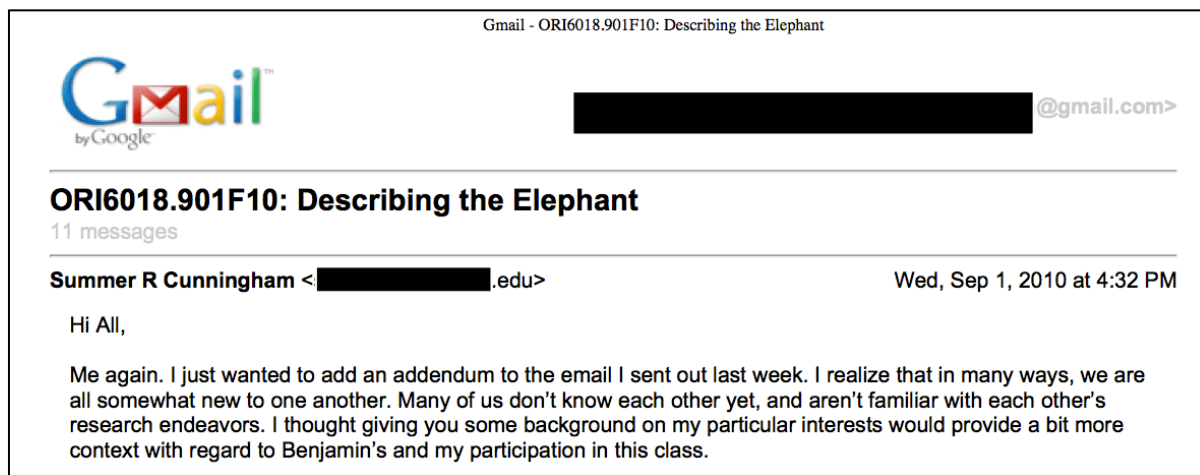


Figure 5: Second email to Performance Art class about Benjamin's participation.

*Hi All,*

*Me again. I just wanted to add an addendum to the email I sent out last week. I realize that in many ways, we are all somewhat new to one another. Many of us don't know each other yet, and aren't familiar with each other's research endeavors. I thought giving you some background on my particular interests would provide a bit more context with regard to Benjamin's and my participation in this class.*

*I am interested in motherhood and academia, not just as experiences, but as institutions with hegemonic discourses and practices. Because of my research and positionality, I am both sensitive to and critical of the ways in which we delimit, bound, and define (public/academic/work/performance) spaces. These are issues I*

*explore in my work, and, in work as in life, I often explore these issues with my son. For example, last semester Benjamin and I piloted a collaborative research project where we interviewed other graduate student single mothers AND their children about their experiences related to the mother's pursuit of an education. I interviewed the mothers; Benjamin interviewed the children. As a single mother, Benjamin is often (more often than not, in fact) present when I conduct, write, and think about research. His presence certainly influences my experiences and ideas, but this was the first time I had considered formally including and making visible his impact on the work. My dissertation project will be an extension of this collaborative methodology. Meaning, Benjamin and I are embarking on a project together. A central aspect of our project will be performance.*

*Of course, as you can probably see, Benjamin is ecstatic about participating in this class because he has a genuine passion for performance. I am taking this class because I also have an interest in performance, and because I hope the class will be influential in the development of our project. Additionally, I believe that his participation in this class will instill in him a more complex understanding of performance. I want him to see how performance can be used as a means to create, but also as a way to critique and question. Indeed, I feel that his very presence in the class illustrates this function of performance.*

*Finally, I truly believe that Benjamin has much to bring to the class. I hope that in hindsight you will look back and be able to say that our presence and participation in this community somehow enriched your experience. All that being said, I realize this is not conventional, and I don't for a minute believe that any one person's work takes priority over any others. I want us all to be able to do the work we need to do in this class. So please, let's address specific concerns while at the same time being mindful that with performance art, it might not always be possible or ideal to eliminate every discomfort.*

*Thank you,*

*Summer*

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I was fortunate to be part of an amazing department that in so many ways welcomed both my son and myself into the community. Nevertheless, I still felt there was a divide or distance when I tried to explain to my colleagues what it meant to move through graduate school as a single mother. It was as though there was a willingness to accept my single mother status at a superficial level, maybe even commend me for "my

efforts,” but there was the expectation that certain matters should simply remain “private,” i.e., invisible; that I should spare others from thinking about what the doing and living of that life might actually be like, for me and for Ben. The invisibility of our particular life situation and the way it was so often at odds with academic culture left me feeling alienated from my peers and my community. At this time in my department, there were only a small number of other parents and I was the only single mother—there was good reason that my colleagues could not understand my experience or situation. This divide between parents and non-parents is something Maushart claims is the result of the mask of motherhood. She explains, “there does seem to be a great divide between parents and nonparents in our society: becoming a parent does change you in significant and irreversible ways into a different person” (5). However, for Maushart, the “change” of having children is not solely or even mostly responsible for the divide—it’s the fact that there is a social taboo about telling the truths of motherhood. The true cause of the divide is silence and invisibility.

It was at this time and during this class, that Benjamin and I put together our “Open House” performance. It is one of several experiments in voice and visibility that have been at the center of my work over the last several years, both scholarly and everyday attempts (sometimes with Ben and other times solo) at navigating the disagreements and disinterest surrounding motherhood.

## EXCURSUS A: OPEN HOUSE PERFORMANCE



Figure 6 Our bungalow, a duplex, from the outside. Our unit was the one on the right with the two chairs on either side of the door.

On Thursday Sept. 23, 2010 as part of an in-class performance,<sup>29</sup> Benjamin and I displayed a slideshow of photos of our home that Benjamin had taken over the course of the previous week (see Figures 6 through 11). We had recently moved from our first Tampa rental, a furnished home, into an unfurnished bungalow. For the most part, we were still living out of boxes (Figure 10), but really didn't have that much stuff because when we'd relocated to Tampa from Phoenix a year earlier we only arrived with the things that would fit in my four-door, mid-sized sedan.

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<sup>29</sup> Additional documentation from the "Open House" performance, including the full artist's statement, can be found in Appendix I.



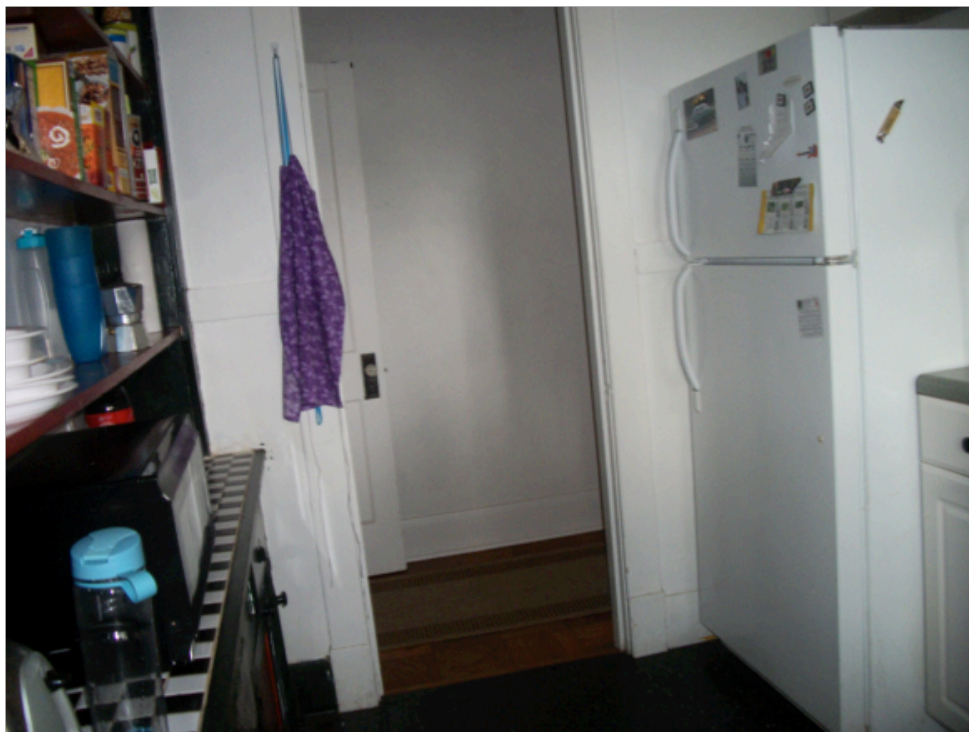


Figure 7: Our kitchen.



Figure 8: Me in the kitchen.



Figure 9: Our cat, Garfield, who likes to play in ashy fireplaces.



Figure 10: Fireplace with moving boxes stacked around it and boxes and canvases in front of it to prevent the cat from playing in the ashes.



Figure 11: My messy desk and more bare white walls.

We divided our Performance Art class into four small groups. Each group was presented with an envelope containing an invitation to our “Open House” (see Appendix I) and a key to our home. Class members were instructed that our house would be open for one full week and they were free to drop by anytime, with or without calling ahead. An excerpt from the Artist Statement<sup>30</sup> provides a bit more insight into the performance:

This performance is about the everyday, the mundane and the not so mundane, creation, chance, invitation, reversal, participation, collaboration, home, public/private, community, borders/boundaries,

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<sup>30</sup> See Appendix for full statement.

space, risk, vulnerability, interruption, and life. Our life. And maybe yours, also.

For Benjamin, this is an opportunity for our peers to see into our everyday, to see what our life is like right now, and maybe that will give them a better idea as to who we are as human beings in our society.

For Summer, this is also an opportunity to extend her current interests with regard to the intersection of (single)motherhood and academia. Although much of her (and Ben's) everyday lived experiences happen at USF, there is much in life that doesn't happen there. A large portion of our lives are lived in our homes ("Open House" Artist Statement).

A major idea behind this project was that, while seeing us at school made our life visible to our community in certain ways, our lives aren't lived solely inside the walls of the university. If we wanted people to have a better understanding of what our life was like, we would need them to see other parts of our life. As you can see from the artist's statement, however, the thrust was not only about making the private public or making the unseen visible, it was about trying to connect to our community. We were trying to garner connection and participation.

Over the course of the week, some class members came and others didn't. Some people announced their visits, and others didn't. A favorite moment for both of us was when we arrived home one day after school and running errands. It was pouring down rain and we were both struggling to carry armloads of groceries into the house so we wouldn't have to make multiple wet trips. We had parked in the back of the house, so we didn't notice there were cars out front.



Figure 12: A colleague from our class smiles while painting our wall blue. His partner sits in the background creating an artwork at the “art station” we’d set up for guests to enjoy.

When we walked into our house we found another member from our class with his partner, our professor with her partner and their daughter all painting our living room wall the most brilliant shade of blue (Figure 12). That morning before leaving we had set a blank canvas against the wall with some paint and other crafting options along with a set of directions/suggestions that if anyone showed up that day, they might paint the canvas so we’d have something to hang on our the empty white walls (see Figure 11). These guests had understood that we meant for the actual wall to be painted. Upon entering the space, Benjamin and I joined in on the painting, and our professor and family later brought over their dinner to share with us. The surprise of finding these guests painting the walls in our home on a rainy day brightened and warmed our home,

both literally and figuratively. Both acts—the painting of the wall and the sharing of the meal—made us feel cared for and connected to our academic community. From that day, each time we walked into our house the first thing we saw was our beautiful blue wall (Figure 14); it became a constant reminder of our friends, membership to, and connection with this community. When we eventually moved from that bungalow, we had a sample of the blue paint color matched at the hardware store. We painted the kitchen of our new home the same color—the color that feels like connection and home to us; the color that reminds us of one of our first experiences of being accepted and seen within this particular community.

As a performer/scholar/artist/mother, this performance was interesting to me for several reasons. First of all, in terms of voice, Benjamin was able to participate in ways that honored his unique talents and sensibilities. He took photographs of the house and our home-life from his point of view that were used during the in-class invitation, he helped design and implement some of the other components of the performance (activities that took place in the house), he wrote his own portion of the artist statement, and afterward, as part of a different assignment for the class, he created his own comic-style documentation piece (see Figure 13) that later grew into a serial, self-produced strip/zine called “Mom’s School” that he distributed in the Department of Communication at USF. In short, he had several opportunities to say how he understood the project, and he had a chance to do work on the project in ways that were meaningful to him. Benjamin was interested and he participated; his contributions in the constitution of this piece were felt and apparent.



Figure 13: Open House by Benjamin. Translated by Summer Cunningham.

Day 1: Ben, “when are people gonna come” Summer “when they are ready”

Day 2: Ben, “omg!”

Day 3: Ben, “ahh!”

Day 4: Ben, “omg! ahh!”

Day 5 (Day): (Daniel, Sebastian and Margo visit.)

Day 5 (night): (Blake and Nancy visit.)

Day 6: (Kari visits.)

Day 7: (David, Steve, Kelly, Haddie, and Stacy visit [and paint the wall]).

Day 8: (DJ visits.)

The project was also interesting in terms of garnering interest and participation from other members of the community as well. Members of our community were invited, not forced to participate, and in this sense everyone’s participation (or decision not to participate) created the experience and outcome of the project. To me, this is a more accurate reflection of how our worlds are actually constituted via both the

presence and absence of others. For those who came over, I think many left with a new perspective on what Ben's and my life is like—in relation to academia and in general. In fact, I know many left with new perspectives because several people communicated this to me, and some of this documentation is included later in this dissertation. This project also impacted people who didn't or couldn't come. A couple of people communicated to me that they had wanted to attend, but due to other obligations simply were unable to make it, and this made them feel guilty which gave me an opportunity to explain how that is often part of my experience as a single mother attending graduate school. There are professional and social obligations that exceed teaching duties and attending graduate classes; such events are often out of reach when you are faced simultaneously with a poverty of time and money. There were many times I wanted to attend events, and simply couldn't. Likewise, Benjamin's experience of sitting in my office while I was in class—so close to me down the hall but so far away from what was going on—was a similar experience of not being able to be present in the space where I needed and wanted to be. In sum, this performance created an opportunity for various members of the class to consider and discuss the relationship(s) among space, time, academic work and life, and mothering in contemporary culture.

This project was facilitated from a communication orientation that understands communication as constitutive and connecting. Many people participated in the creation of this performance. After all was said and done, I felt more connected with the community, and I felt they were more connected to us. I am certain the performative approach facilitated that outcome in a way that other types of research approaches would not have.



From a relational perspective, this project shaped both our relationship (mine and Ben's) to our community in the way that it created a new kind of visibility and new connections (it created presence), but it also shaped the mother-child relationship in rich ways because in this performance we were essentially allowed to be ourselves, we were permitted to act as we normally do in the context of our mother-child relationship. However, because this was also a collaborative project using an approach that enabled each of us to contribute our unique sensibilities, we were also positioned to see one another as co-researchers in a way that other collaborative work did not. For example, at the end of the interview project mentioned in Chapter 1 where Benjamin and I talked with another other graduate student single mothers, I found that even though Benjamin was positioned as my co-researcher, he did not feel fluent or agentic adopting academic methods like qualitative interviewing to explore his or others' life experiences. During this performance, we were able to learn from and with one another, able to play to each other's strengths. We were able to appreciate the other's perspectives without feeling an imperative to operate from their position.

Today my son is sixteen years old—he is not interested in participating in my work anymore, nor is there the same necessity for me as a single mother, still primary caregiver for this child, to integrate my professional and personal life in the same ways. However, when Benjamin was younger, it was important to me that there was a space for him in my endeavors for reasons that have to do with logistics and pragmatics, but also because I want him to feel that he belongs. Despite the desire I felt to create this space for him, it was also important to me that he was not obligated to participate in my work. The “Open House” performance provided an opportunity to honor those needs while connecting (and perhaps consciousness-raising) to others in my community. It

was certainly a learning experience and more. The truth is, Ben and I are learning together all the time, regardless of whether I make that learning a formal part of my research. It is one of the best parts of being a mom.



Figure 14 : The brilliant blue wall that warmed our home and welcomed us home everyday.

## 2. A RELATIONSHIP

**2. A relationship between a woman and her child; a co-constituted relational subjectivity characterized by closeness, dependence, care-giving, and love.**

Motherhood is a relationship. First and foremost, it is the experience of being a woman who is in perpetual relation with a child or children; an experience of growing (with) them, teaching and learning from them, being responsible for and to them. It is an experience of loving and caring for another, of being with and for another. Even when a child's childhood passes into adulthood, the relationship continues, as does the experience of motherhood, and the relationship changes. The experience and the relationship are always changing. Motherhood is also the experience of being in relationship with other people: friends, relatives, colleagues, strangers. Motherhood creates particular (im)possibilities for being in relationships with others.

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*Dear Benjamin,*

*There was a tiny white dot inside of the vast dark space on the ultrasound monitor in the technician's office. That was the first time I saw you. Well, you weren't really you yet. You were the possibility of you. (You are still the possibility of you.)*

*When it happened I was shocked at how I felt and shocked at how clear my feelings were. Even though I was young and single, I knew I would not have an abortion. I knew I would not put you up for adoption. I knew that my life as I knew it was over. And I was somehow OK with that because I wanted to meet you so badly. I wanted to know you. I wanted to see who you would become. (I had no clue at the time the impact you would have on the person I would become).*

*When I saw the possibility of you on the monitor, I also saw the possibility of us. It was a (dis)comforting sort of realization, like a we're- in-this-love-together type of thing, and also a, Fuck!-I-am-responsible-for-another-human-being kind of thing.*

*In the face of that fear, and all those unknowns, I felt that the only way I could do it and feel good about myself would be to promise to you, my future child, a person I could barely conceive of as anything more than a dot in my uterus, that I would do everything for you. I would make sure that you wouldn't want for anything, that you would have a good life with a bright future, and that you would never feel that you were at a loss because you had a teenage mother.*

*In order to make that promise to you, I had to believe that I, at seventeen, was capable of keeping my promise. And I did believe it.*

*I made this promise to you even though at the time I couldn't possibly have known what it would mean. But that is a key test of a promise, isn't it? It is an agreement that you pledge to adhere to, no matter what circumstances arise. A*

*promise is a promise because it is something you agree to do despite—or perhaps in the face of—a future of unknown (im)possibilities. That is why promises are so hard to keep: im-possible to keep.*<sup>31</sup>

### **Be There Mother; Help Me, Do This**

Corey Anton writes that “our self-becoming is tied to the particular others with whom we share concrete relationships”(91). The mother-child relationship is arguably one of the most concrete and closest relationships experienced in our culture, and it is a relationship that is very much about being and becoming. Firstly, the mother-child relationship is about being together, existing with another. The mother-child relationship, motherhood really, is also very much about becoming: becoming people, becoming subjects. People become people only after a woman feeds and nurtures a fetus inside of herself, inside of her body, and then after this initial labor, delivers into the world a person. Each life is brought into the world via a woman who we refer to in contemporary culture as the birth mother. You and I and all people entered the world

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<sup>31</sup> When I talk about this promise, I am talking about a real promise I made to my son, but I am also thinking with Derrida’s ideas on the relationship between im-possibility and promises. Promises are about time: they are gifts given in the present but upheld (or not) in the future. As Calcagno explains, “What is promised is never fully present except through its signs and representations in consciousness. What is promised is continually delayed and differentiated” in a future of unknowns (22). The future is about possibility, about what is to come. However, since it is impossible to know what is to come, promises are also impossible to keep. A promise at once is “the double bind of possibility of the promise and impossibility that is the broken promise . . . folded into the concept of the to come” (Calcagno 23). Thus, promises can be said to create conditions of im-possibility in the Derridean sense in two ways. First, they create conditions of possibility that lie in deferment, delay and differentiation (*différance*), and, two, they structure conditions for the im-possibility of new events to come about, events that arise only because a promise is made. Making this promise to Benjamin did not make it possible for me to keep the promise itself in the face of all the future events that we faced together in the way I had initially intended, but it made it possible for me to act, to do, and to keep *variations* of the promise *sometimes*. This promise made other aspects of our life and relationship possible in many little, immeasurable ways and produced moments and events so numerous that I cannot fully account for them all, but some of them are revealed in my continued correspondence to him in Chapter 3.

this way, became people through our birth mother. And in most cases in contemporary Western culture, much of who we are as people is also the result of the close relationship we had with our mothers (the woman who was our primary caregiver) during the formative years of our childhood.<sup>32</sup> As Lenore Langsdorf explains, “We are the results of a process of care which is a condition that precedes our being and continues (in various ways and to diverse degrees) to sustain our being” (337-338); and in this culture it is primarily mothers who provide such care. However, as Adreinne Rich points out, the mother-child relationship is not one-sided. She explains that motherhood is “an intense, *reciprocal* relationship with a particular child, or children” (Rich 37, emphasis added); thus, mothers do not merely make people, children make women mothers.

Cultural anthropologist Dorothy Lee draws her understanding of the reciprocal nature of the mother-child relationship from her research with the Wintu Indians; “the Wintu Indians...can never say ‘I have a son.’ In fact, they never say ‘a son’ or ‘a mother.’ Instead, they say ‘a-her-son’ and ‘a-his-mother,’ always bringing to notice both ends of relatedness. For, how can a woman be *a* mother unless she is *somebody’s* mother?” (Lee 77).<sup>33</sup> For Lee, one of the insights of her research was not just the co-relational emphasis

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<sup>32</sup> Western culture, with particular thanks owed to the influence of psychoanalytic theory, “assumes an inevitable and necessary *single* mother-infant relationship” (not “single” in terms of marital status, but in terms of being one individual person) whereby the biological mother bears the role and responsibility for nurturing and caring for a child, particularly in infancy. However, as Chodorow and others have pointed out, while there is evidence to suggest children, particularly in their early years, need a “constancy of care and a certain quality of care by *someone* or some few *persons*” there is no evidence to suggest that the only person equipped to provide that care for a child is its biological mother. In fact, the belief that the biological mother is the only one who can perform such care adequately “implies major limits to changing the social organization of gender” (Chodorow 39).

<sup>33</sup> It is Anton who introduced me to Lee’s ideas about particularity in his essay “Agency and Efficacy in Interpersonal Communication: Particularity as Once-Occurrence and Noninterchangeability.” Thus here I borrow but also build upon Anton’s ideas about particularity: whereas Anton saw Lee’s ideas as an illustration of relational particularity in

placed on the mother-child relationship, but the idea of the uniqueness of each mother-child relationship. From the Wintu, Lee begins to understand that a new mother is born every time a woman has a child; if a woman has five children she becomes a new, particular, different mother each time because of the unique relationship with each child. As Lee explains, “A mother has been born, mother-to-*this* child, and a new relationship of motherness has come into being. When this is recognized, the mother is helped to sense the particularity of her child, and the peculiar favor, the peculiar quality of the relationship that she can have with each child” (79). Thus motherhood is a relational project about existence, a project with constantly varying, unique possibilities for being together; for becoming people together. And, to the extent that it is a relational project about being for another and becoming other together, it is a project of love. As Hardt and Negri explain, being and love are related projects:

When we engage in the production of subjectivity that is love, we are not merely creating new objects or even new subjects in the world. Instead we are producing a new world, a new social life. Being, in other words, is not some immutable background against which life takes place, but is rather a living relation in which we constantly have the power to intervene. Love is an ontological event in that it marks a rupture with what exists and the creation of the new. Being is constituted by love.” (180 – 181)

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Utterance: /MA – MA/  
 Gloss: HELP ME, SEE THIS, BE THERE  
 Function: Existence

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general, I point to Lee’s work specifically to hone in on the unique particularities made possible by mother-child relationships.

The second section of the six part *PPD project* “Documentation II: Analysed Utterances and Related Speech Events” (DII) displays the analysis of 23 holophrastic utterances made by Kelly Barrie, Mary Kelly’s son, between months 17 and 19. Holophrastic utterances are single words that express a complete and/or more complex thought than the word alone would normally signify. For example, the utterance “mama” above (utterance 1 out of 23), was spoken by Kelly Barrie in one particular context, getting ready for bed, to mean: *help me, see this, be there*. More specifically, the child wanted his mother to help him, to see him, to be there for him; he wanted his mother to be present and to exist with him in that moment. Thus, the function of the utterance is *existence*.

The 23 utterances in *DII* are displayed individually, each stamped onto a lined wooden placard along with the *gloss* (the fuller meaning of the utterance), the utterance’s *function*, the date, and Kelly Barrie’s age at the time of the utterance. Below each of the wooden placards that contain a single utterance is an index card that provides transcribed details of the speech event from which the single utterance emerged.

The words on the placards (see Figure 15) are created with self-made stamps that were constructed by manually arranging individual typeface letters—approximately the size of the character stamps used on typewriter. The original self-made stamp of each utterance is then displayed on the wooden placard immediately above the stamped information, the words of the stamp appearing as a kind of mirror image of the stamped-typed face.



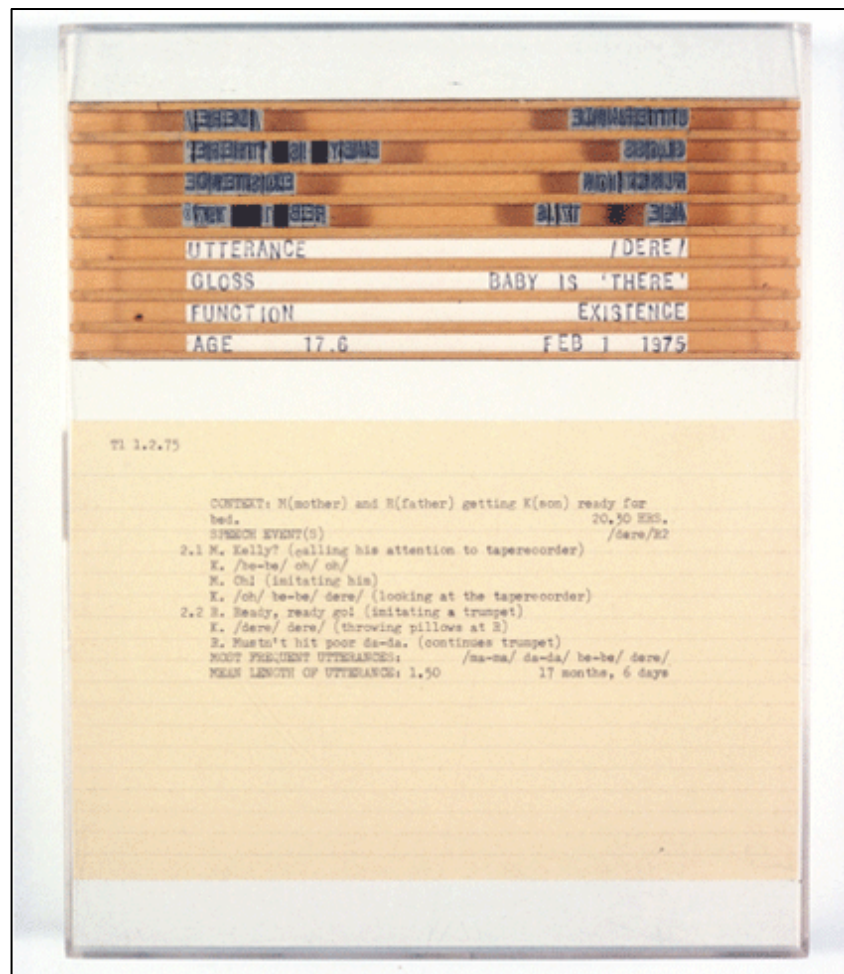


Figure 15: One of the 23 utterances and its accompanying notecard. *Post-Partum Document: "Documentation II, Analysed Utterances and Related Speech Events,"* 1975. Collection, Art Gallery of Ontario.

These moveable letters offer a visual illustration of the limit and possibility of language: the individual letters can be moved around and arranged into different words. The same letters, when re-arranged differently, can be used to spell a different word, with a different meaning. These words can then be arranged in a certain manner to create an entire phrase or sentence of meaning, and then, like the letters, the same words can be re-ordered and combined with other words made of other letters to create different sentences.

The possible combination of letters is almost limitless as is the larger combination of words, yet we know that there is a limit. Certain combinations of letters could create words that aren't real. And certain words strung together would be meaningless. Language, like most forms of communication, is situated culturally and governed by a grammar. To do something intelligible with letters and words, you must follow certain rules. Documentation II illustrates that there are both limits and possibilities within the realm of rule-governed communication; rules about what meaning can be made and what can and cannot be. We can see when we look at DII that to remain intelligible, our communication must follow the rules, yet these stamps offer a nice reminder of the possibilities that lie in the making of words and sentences. We can imagine how we might creatively re-arrange letters, words, and phrases to make new and perhaps different meanings. Thus, language as a form of communication is a promise: a promise of meaning. But like all promises, it is a possibility, not a guarantee: "Meanings are possible, but they can never be fixed. Hence, they are simultaneously possible and impossible" (Calcagno 20).

The wooden placards, when paired with their speech events show us something more about communication and meaning: meaning is made from within a particular context, and examining these holophrastic utterances in the context of their accompanying speech events reveals much about mother-child relationship. Thus, examining any single mother child relationship, such as the one which is the focus of *Post-Partum Document*, can at once tell us about the particularities of that relationship, but also about the social and cultural rules imposed by motherhood and the (im)possibility for which types of relationships and subjectivities might be produced. In other words, these placards give us a glimpse at the way selves are relationally and

contextually constituted, and, therefore, changing over time in different context with different people. On the one hand, this relational, contextual, dynamic way of being and becoming with others is not without limit though its possibilities are plentiful. On the other hand, these placards that depict the relational being that develops in the earliest moments of interpersonal interaction confronts the static ideal of autonomous subjectivity so prevalent throughout Western culture.

Utterance: /MO/  
 Gloss: GIVE ME 'MORE' MILK  
 Function: RECURRENCE

In *DII*, there is an index card placed below the utterance above (number 3 out of 23) which explains that Mary Kelly and her son were having tea together when this request (Gloss: GIVE ME 'MORE' MILK) was expressed. This single utterance illustrates a specificity of the mother-child relationship, showing that mother is the provider of sustenance, the giver of care, and also, that the child expects and demands this of the mother, his caregiver. As noted earlier, the mother-child relationship is reciprocal, “[t]his relationship, however, is not symmetrical. Mother and child participate in it in radically different ways” (Chodorow 29). He is dependent on her, and while that is a condition that might seem ‘natural’ to the child, why should we take for granted that this is an expectation that would feel natural to the mother? Might she not sometimes feel resentful? Particularly when she must fulfill such demands over and over again? As indicated above, the function of this utterance is connected to recurrence, but the recurrence here is not just that the child is asking for a recurrence of milk to appear in his cup; the mother is asked, repeatedly to be the one to fill the cup. As Tillie Olsen explains, “More than in any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more,

motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible”(18). Such interruptions happen over and over again and it is the mother who is *expected* to respond lovingly to these interruptions. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich recalls a particularly poignant conversation with one of her sons: “You seemed to feel you ought to love us all the time. But there is no human relationship where you love the other person at every moment.’ Yes, I tried to explain to him, but women—above all, mothers—have been supposed to love that way.” (23)

### Mom’s School by Ben: A Translation by Summer (Ben’s Mom)

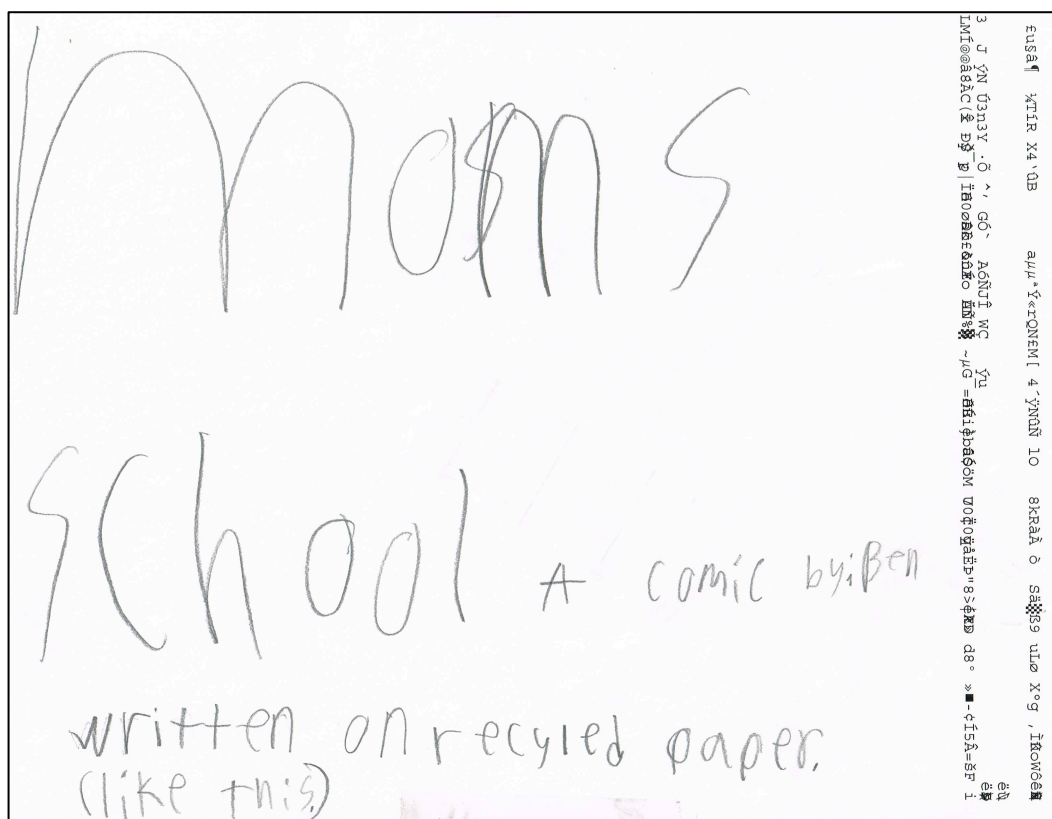


Figure 16: Title page from “Mom’s School” comic.

“Mom’s School” (Figure 16) was a serial comic strip that Benjamin created during our Performance Art class. He was particularly interested in chance operations and randomness, ideas we were studying in the class, and so he incorporated these concepts into the distribution of his comic. Each week he would draw his original comic on a piece of recycled paper that I kept as scrap paper in my desk drawer school. This scrap paper was comprised mostly of nonsensical printouts made in our graduate student computer lab—our old printer had issues. You would attempt to print a paper or an article and the machine would print out a bunch of garbled letters that made no coherent sense. Instead of tossing these, I saved them for notes or for Ben to draw on.

After creating his comic, Benjamin would bring it to the copy machine in the Department of Communication and make a random number of photocopies. The copies were not exact replicas of the comic; each week he would also include/impose one or two silly bands along the outside perimeter of the comic. Silly bands are essentially rubber bands that come in different colors and shapes (everything from stars to animals to guitars), and during this time the elementary and middle school kids collected and traded them. The bands were often worn on wrists like bracelets. Benjamin was obsessed with these bands for awhile. And Benjamin, like other people, wanted to be seen by others to share the things that were important to him. Thus, I think he wanted to share these bands with people for some of the same reasons he wanted to share his comic, and the photocopies allowed him a way to do so without having to part with any of the precious bands. After making his select number of copies, Benjamin would then choose another number at random which he used to distribute the comics to faculty and graduate student mailboxes. So, if he picked the number seven, he would go to the mailboxes and begin counting from the first one to the seventh; the seventh box would

receive a comic, and the next seventh one after that, and so on until he had distributed all of the copies for the week. I kept a display of these comics outside of my office door, and each week I would add the newest one.

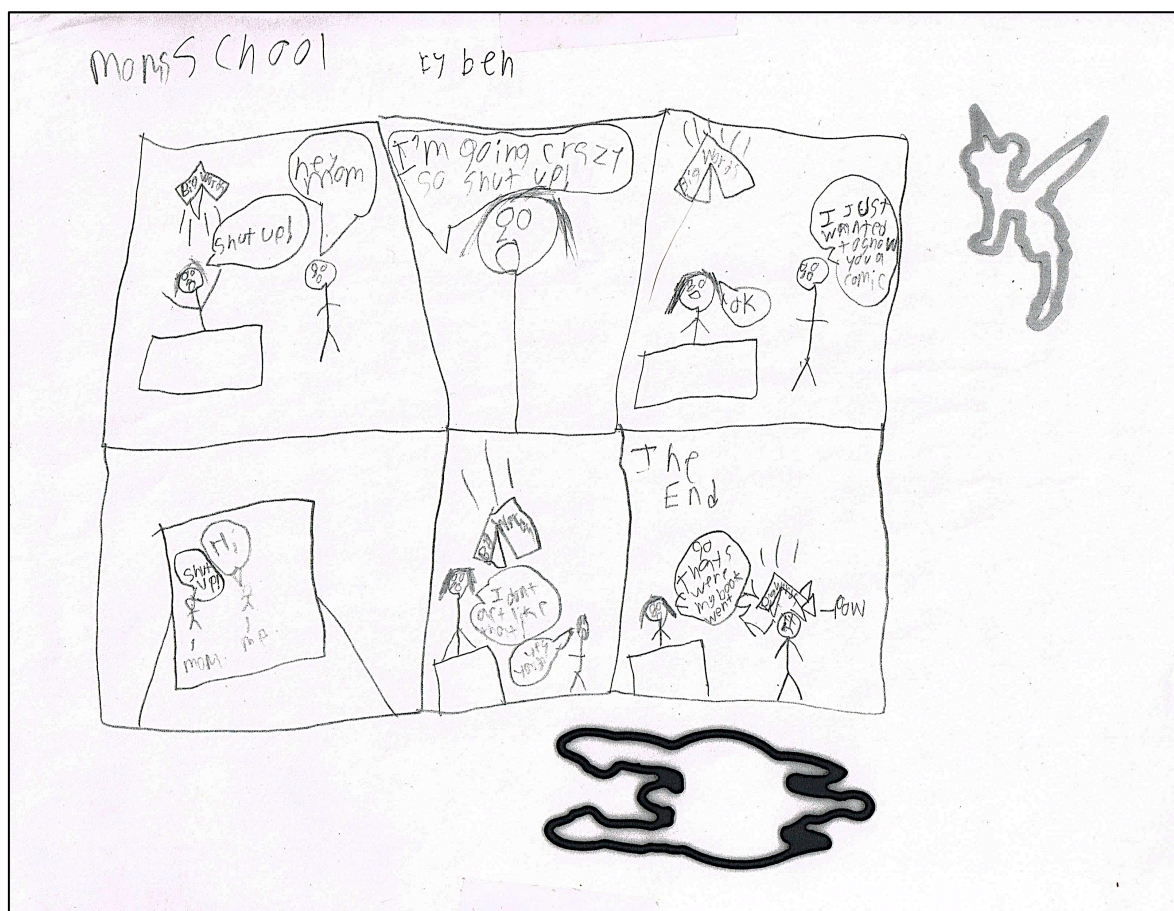


Figure 17: Mom's School by Ben, "I'm Going Crazy So Shut Up!" Reading frames from left to right:

**Frame 1:** Ben, "hey mom" Summer, "shut up!" (Book titled 'Big Words' ascends into the air.)

**Frame 2:** Summer, "I'm going crazy so shut up!"

**Frame 3:** Ben, "I just wanted to show you a comic" Summer, "ok" (Book titled 'Big Words' descending toward ground.)

**Frame 4:** (Comic.) Me, "Hi" Mom, "Shut up!"

**Frame 5:** Summer, "I don't act like that!" Ben, "yes you do" (Book titled 'Big Words' descending closer to ground.)

**Frame 6:** Pow (Book titled 'Big Words' lands on Ben's head.) Summer, "So thats were my book went."

The comics most generally offered a reflection of the things going on in our life at the time from the perspective of an 11-year-old, and very often involved a critique of our mother-child relationship with regard to my participation in graduate school. For example, in the comic displayed in Figure 17, Ben depicts my preoccupation with my books of “big words,” showing how that coincides with my inability to respond lovingly to his interruption for attention. Read this way the comic indicates that Ben as author was a child who was perhaps very aware of the that part of the good mother norm, the cultural expectation that mothers exist for their children and are always supposed to put a child first. Read another way, the comics seemed to tell a story of a child who wanted to be seen and heard by his mother and his community and large, and who likely often times felt lonely.

Of course he did. That the mother is required to be the exclusive caregiver, companion and center of the child and the child relies upon her to be all those things at all times is troubling. A mother cannot be all those things always because it is impossible, but when she cannot be or chooses not to be because she has other needs and desires outside of the role of mother, who then is for the child? Thus, the exclusiveness of the mother-child relationship is a problem for mother and child.

Indeed, the exclusiveness of the mother-child relationship, with its romantic, idealized and powerful intensity, is a construct that can be dangerous for both mothers and children as well as the relationship. To be clear, it is not the being/becoming quality of mother-child relationship that is dangerous; it is the exclusive requirement that is detrimental. The becoming together of the mother-child relationship, with all of its possibilities for particularity, transformation and growth—that sort of being is a form of love. However, the social imperative for the exclusiveness of the mother-child

relationship and the connected exclusive duties and requirements of good motherhood are an exploitation and corruption of that love.

Love is not exclusionary or finite; and although mothers and children might have the opportunity to share and create special bonds, relating to and caring for others in love is not something exclusive to mothers and children. Mothers need others. Children do too.

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Each utterance and its accompanying speech event(s) in *DII* illustrate the deeply intersubjective existence of the mother-child relationship, at once showing a child's dependence, need, and/or desire for the mother to be present with him, to interpret for him, and to *see* him. In this way, Kelly does not merely show us how mothers and children co-produce and inhabit a relational subjectivity, but via the display of 23 different holophrastic utterances, she illustrates the particularities of that relational subjectivity.

The 23 utterances displayed are each different because the speech events that contextualize the utterances are always different and always changing, thus, the meaning of a single word can change from event to event. For example, utterance #4 and utterance #6 each reflect the word "kitty." However, the context and speech event on the index cards below them illustrate a difference in meaning. In utterance #4, while getting ready for bed, the child spots a cat outside the window and runs toward the window screaming "dit-dy, dit-dy," translating to the gloss: "KITTY' IS THERE" which has a function of *existence*. Whereas in utterance #6, the child again sees the kitty outside the window, but this time the cat is crossing the street, walking away. The child utters, "ki-ki" this time meaning "Come here, kitty.," as though asking the cat to return



to him. The function is thus *recurrence*. The utterances, like the mother-child relationship, are dynamic and changing; they shift constantly as the child's needs and desires change from one moment to the next. A mother's ability to translate a child's utterances is contingent on the closeness of their relationship and on the time they spend together. The time they spend together makes it possible for a mother to get to know her child deeply, to understand his particularities, to develop a keen awareness for subtleties in communication, and of course, the repeated daily interaction makes her familiar with the context(s) from which he is speaking because she is constantly a part of it. We can understand then how it is difficult for an outsider, a stranger, or even a family member who does not spend so much time being with the child to misunderstand or to be completely clueless about the very same utterances coming from a child. Indeed, mothers are often called upon to translate the communication of their children to others; to explain the context.

### **Mom's School by Ben: A Translation by Summer (Ben's Mom)**

In terms of voice and visibility, *Mom's School* is an interesting project. I don't mean that I, as Ben's mother, find it interesting. I mean, of course I do. It's funny, critical, and sometimes hard for me to read, but it interests me. More importantly, or equally as important, is that Benjamin's comic and his methods of distribution garnered the interest of others. It was not always a positive interest, and I do not think it was the interest he was hoping to garner—contact and a deeper membership with the community that he saw himself a part of, or perhaps longed to be a part of though he often found himself on its perimeter. Nevertheless, his comic did garner interest, and thus by Lyotard's terms, it qualifies as *interesting*. As evidenced in the following email

exchange, some of the conversation the comic garnered points out the desire people have in maintaining a discourse of *disinterest* around motherhood and its surrounding issues:

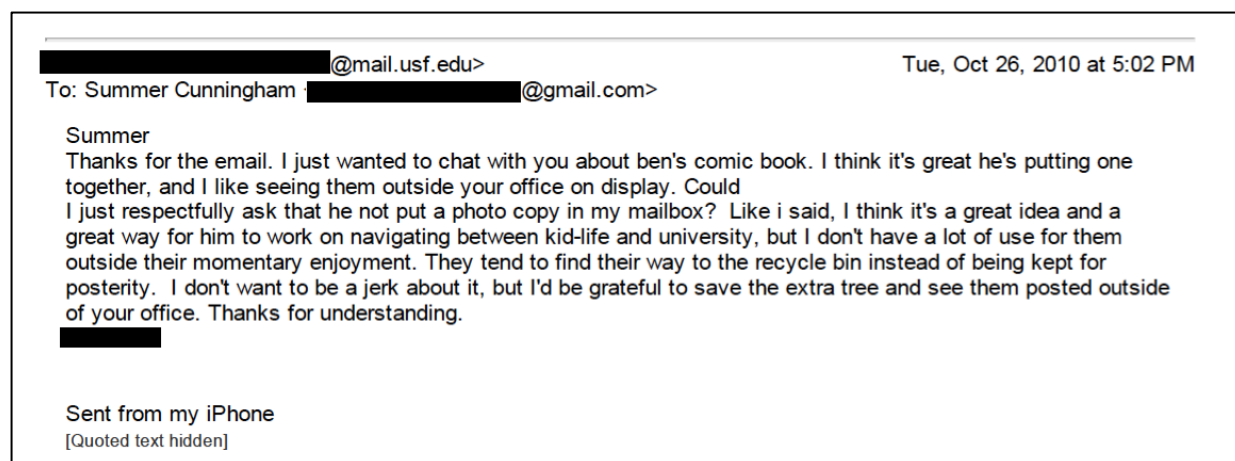


Figure 18: An email from a colleague to me about the distribution of Ben's comic.

My initial reaction to this email was quite simply to feel devastated for Ben. The sender was a colleague of mine who I knew Benjamin considered to be a personal friend, and he would have been crushed had he heard these comments from her. I imagine she knew this to be the case, which is why she probably decided to ask me to handle the situation in a way that would disguise that the true origin of the request had come from her. I felt angry and frustrated by the situation and I could not respond right away. I did not feel it was fair of her to ask me to intervene with Benjamin in this, and felt that if she had to have asked him face-to-face, she might have had to reconsider what it was she was really asking him to do and what she was asking me to do. After spending some time cooling off and thinking through the implications of her request, I responded with the following email:

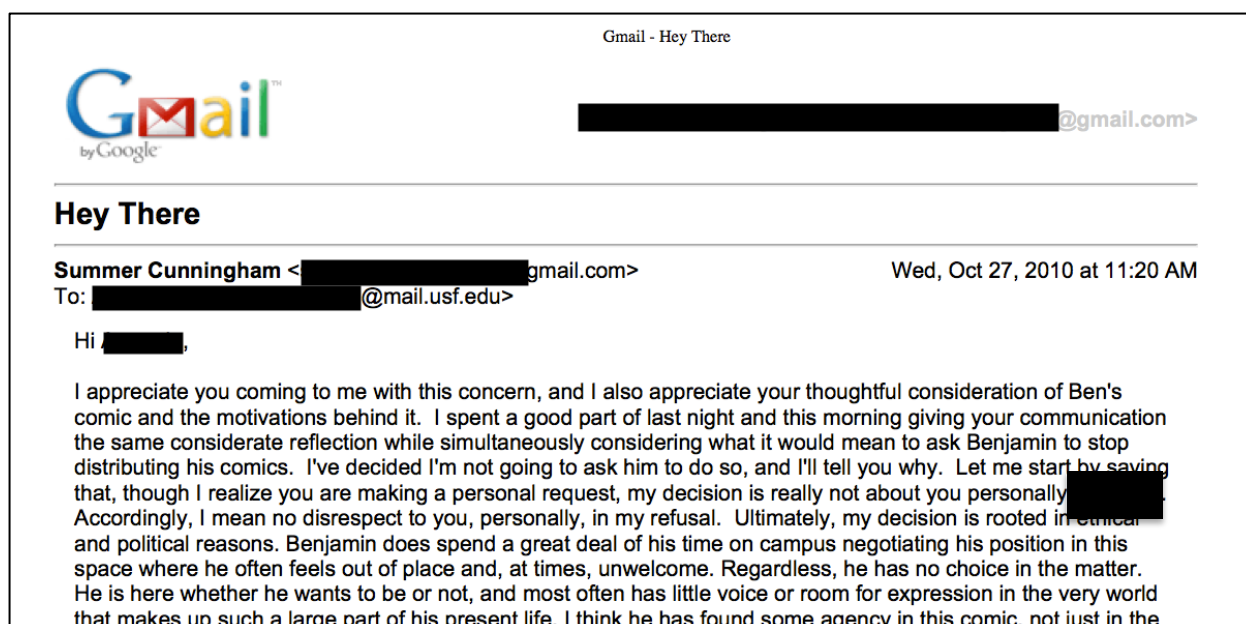


Figure 19: My response to my colleague's email in Figure 18.

Hi [redacted],

*I appreciate you coming to me with this concern, and I also appreciate your thoughtful consideration of Ben's comic and the motivations behind it. I spent a good part of last night and this morning giving your communication the same considerate reflection while simultaneously considering what it would mean to ask Benjamin to stop distributing his comics. I've decided I'm not going to ask him to do so, and I'll tell you why. Let me start by saying that, though I realize you are making a personal request, my decision is really not about you personally, [redacted]. Accordingly, I mean no disrespect to you, personally, in my refusal. Ultimately, my decision is rooted in ethical and political reasons. Benjamin does spend a great deal of his time on campus negotiating his position in this space where he often feels out of place and, at times, unwelcome. Regardless, he has no choice in the matter. He is here whether he wants to be or not, and most often has little voice or room for expression in the very world that makes up such a large part of his present life. I think he has found some agency in this comic, not just in the making of it, but in the way he has chosen to display and distribute it. He considers it a communicative performance, and he is systematic about the way he distributes it. It announces his presence in his own voice to people who see him, to people who don't, and to people who don't want to. I don't believe this kind of communicative, agentic act should be regulated, stifled or silenced. In fact, I think to do so would be unethical. Given these reasons, I cannot and will not ask him to stop putting them in people's boxes.*

*However, there is certainly no expectation for you to keep them for posterity. I don't think that's the point. I sincerely hope you didn't/don't feel that obligation, and if you did feel so because you and Ben know each other in a personal, friendly way, please let me alleviate that expectation. What you do with the mail in your box just as what you do with any communication [you] receive is up to you. How you choose to interpret the communication --whether you choose to ignore, reflect, enjoy, or remain indifferent-- that is your right as receiver. If they get recycled or even trashed, that says something, too. And, well, I think that's the risk we all take when trying to be heard, though for some of us the risks are higher and opportunities fewer.*

*Thanks for your consideration,*

*Summer*

\*\*\*

The terms of contemporary good motherhood, including its exclusionary requirement, are a set of standards upheld by the culture at large. These standards are upheld because they serve certain interests and create privileges for certain members of the society. When child-rearing is organized as the exclusive responsibility of mothers, other members of the culture and of the community are freed-up to focus on their individual interests and pursuits. Further, because motherhood is framed as an elective “choice,” it sometimes seems that those who are exempt from it due to their sex/gender or because they truly have enough privilege to “choose” not to do it, feel entitled to be free of any of its byproducts (children). In other words, the exclusionary requirement of the mother-child relationship combine with other cultural imperatives, such as the separate spheres ideology discussed in Chapter 1 to create the expectation that motherhood and its products (mothers and children) should be contained within the private space of the relationship and within the private sphere of the home. Thus when the products of that relationship bleed out into other spheres they are often not welcomed there.

We could read this email exchange as an example of such a spillage; a moment when the child and his creation spilled over into the privileged child-free area of the working sphere. We could read my colleague’s email to me as an attempt to police this child-free zone and assert her right to be free from children and their creations. Or/and, we could read her final response (Figure 20) and grant that perhaps because she has not done motherwork, because she has not lived from within the exclusionary space of the mother-child relationship, because she has not made the promise to look out for the well-being of a child in this world; maybe she truly could not see the things I see from my standpoint, from my perspective. And maybe, just maybe, when the fuller context and the tiny communicative nuances are explained, she too would be able to understand the fuller meaning of the child’s utterance:

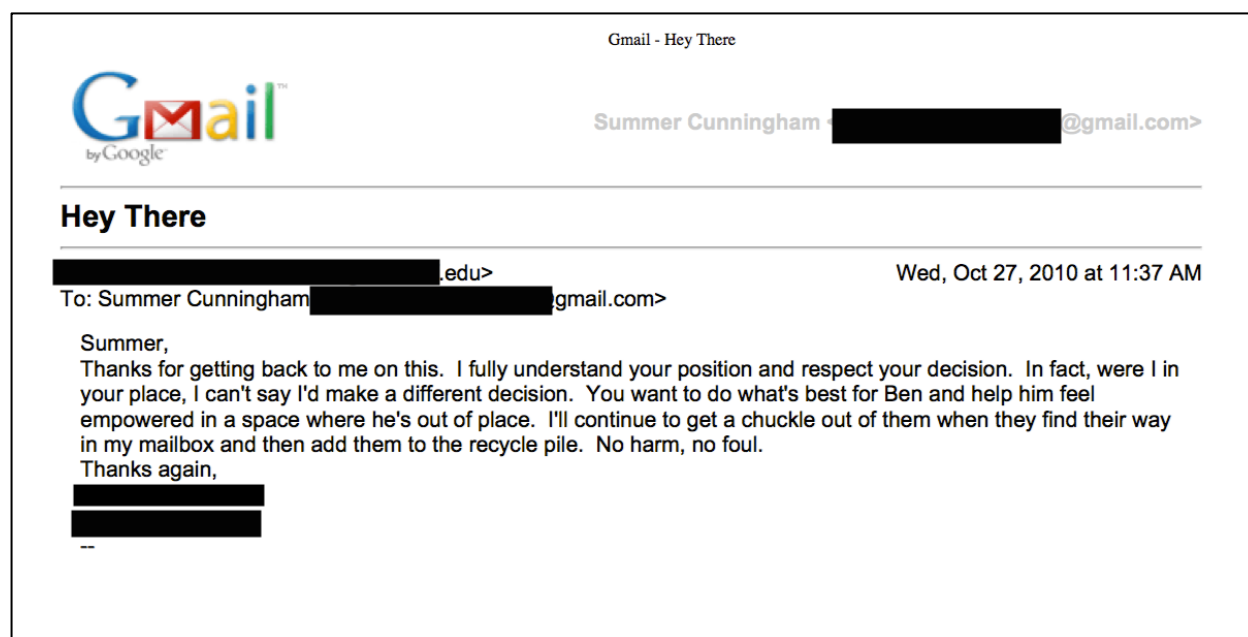


Figure 20: Final email from colleague who requested not to receive “Mom’s School.”

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Table 1 offers an overview of all 23 utterances with their accompanying gloss, function, and date. While each of these utterances can be viewed in the context of a

single speech event, it might also be somewhat artificial to view them this way. When viewed holistically, the 23 utterances remind us that these speech events occur constantly within the day-to-day interaction of the mother-child relationship, and that, particularly during this developmental phase when the child is not yet an articulate communicator, the mother, is called upon constantly to try to translate, to try to understand.

Table 1: Table of all 23 utterances.

<b>Utterance</b>	<b>Gloss</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Age/Date</b>
#1/MA-MA/	HELP ME, SEE THIS, BE THERE	EXISTENCE	17.0/JAN 26
#2/DERE/	BABY IS 'THERE'	EXISTENCE	17.6/FEB 1
#3/MO/	GIVE ME 'MORE' MILK	RECURRENCE	17.7/FEB 2
#4/DIT-DY/	'KITTY' IS THERE	EXISTENCE	17.9/FEB 4
#5/GAH/	KITTY IS 'GONE'	NON-EXISTENCE	17.11/FEB 6
#6/KI-KI/	COME HERE 'KITTY'	RECURRENCE	17.13/FEB 8
#7/AH-GAH/	THE WATER IS 'ALLGONE'	NON-EXISTENCE	17.14/FEB 9
#8/MEH/	THAT IS A 'MAN'	EXISTENCE	17.16/FEB11
#9/BAH/	PUT IT 'BACK'	REJECTION	17.19/FEB 14
#10/SIYEH/	'SEE' THE CAR	EXISTENCE	17.20/FEB 15
#11/NO-NO	'DON'T TOUCH THAT'	REJECTION	17.22/FEB 17
#12/MU/	SEE THE 'MOON'	EXISTENCE	17.24/FEB 19
#13/WEH KA/	SEE THE 'P CAR'	RECURRENCE	17.27/FEB 22
#14/WEH DEH WEKO/	PUT THE 'P RECORD ON'	RECURRENCE	18.0/FEB 25
#15/WEH BOH/	THROW THE 'P BALL'	RECURRENCE	18.4/MAR 2
#16/E WEH KA/	FIND THE 'P CAR'	RECURRENCE	18.5/MAR 3
#17/E WEH BOH/	WHERE IS THE 'P BALL'	RECURRENCE	18.8/MAR 6
#18/E BOH DERE	'THE BALL IS THERE'	EXISTENCE	18.9/MAR 7
#19/DAT/	SEE 'THAT'	EXISTENCE	18.14/MAR 12
#20/DAT E NO-NO	'THAT IS A DON'T TOUCH'	REJECTION	18.16/MAR 14
#21/DAT E RU-RAH	'THAT IS A DRAWING'	EXISTENCE	18.20/MAR 18
#22/SIYEH DAT BRUM/	'SEE THAT BIKE GO BRUM'	EXISTENCE	18.24/MAR 22
#23/SIYEH BE-BE DERE/	'SEE BABY THERE'	EXISTENCE	19.0/MAR 6???

However, the mother does not always understand what the child is saying or wants. This can be frustrating. Kelly explains in the "*Experimentum Mentis*"<sup>35</sup> that the

<sup>34</sup> The date on this placard is March 6, but I suspect this was a typo given the progress of dates in the documentation. Most likely it should be April 6.

<sup>35</sup> A section called "*Experimentum Mentis*" where Kelly unpacks and analyzes the prior section of documentation follows each of the six sections of documentation in *PPD*. These sections are

mother herself is prompted to utter “*Why don’t I understand?*” and once again demonstrates the contingency of the ‘natural capacity’ for maternity” (Kelly 72). Through the detail of each speech event and the accompanying utterances and via her commentary at the end of this section, Kelly points to the myth of the naturalness of maternity, to the idea that mothering should be and is automatically instinctual for women. In the question, “Why don’t I understand?” we can see a hint of the mother blaming herself for not understanding. This ‘maternal utterance,’ as Kelly refers to it, illustrates that the mother is very aware that she is expected to know what the child wants, that she believes or has bought into the culturally generated social expectation that she *should* know, *naturally*. There is blame and judgment in the single utterance, “Why don’t I understand?” as though she is somehow inadequate because she does not know or possess the ability to telepathically or instinctually comprehend all the expressions of her child. Thus we see how the various expectations set by standards of good mothering create a morality against which mothers are judged by others and by which they judge themselves.

Like the child’s holophrastic utterances, this maternal utterance is also holophrastic in that it is much more complex than the phrase alone indicates; it tells us much more about motherhood than it appears to at first glance. Whereas the meaning of the child’s utterance is produced within the context of speech events—‘Tea with Mom’ or ‘Getting Ready for Bed’—the maternal utterance is produced within a larger cultural discursive context of Motherhood. And just as the child’s utterances reveal certain particularities and characteristics about the mother-child relationship, so does the

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often critically reflective of motherhood as an institution and of the mother’s relationship to this institution.

maternal utterance reveal certain particularities about the mother-culture relationship. Again, *PPD* shows us that motherhood is much more than it appears to be on the surface.

### **Motherhood—What (More) Do You See? What (More) Could There Be?**

*Dear Benjamin,*

*A low point for me as your mother was a December day during our first year of living in Tampa. It was so cold, but also, thank god that we live in Florida because it could have been much colder. Your khaki school uniform shorts were not warm enough for that morning, and I felt awful that I couldn't afford the pants version of the uniform required by your school. Earlier in the fall, I'd purchased two pairs of shorts hoping they would be enough to get you through the first part of your school year. I thought pants would be too hot for Florida in August, September, and October. Surely by November I would have the funds for one more pair of bottoms.*

*But I didn't. And I also didn't have enough money to buy you a new pair of shoes because we were living off of my stipend which wasn't enough to support two people, and, due to a bureaucratic mistake by the University that took months to get corrected, I didn't even receive that pay until three months into the semester. Your shoes were falling apart, literally. I duct-taped the right sole onto the top of your shoe, and I prayed that your feet would be warm enough, and that the other kids wouldn't notice. We laughed it off together as I dropped you off to school. You were such a good sport. You said you didn't care. You said it was no big deal.*



*I smiled at you, thanked the universe that you were so wonderful, and left you freezing in front of your school knowing you were there just a few minutes before the bell would ring and would be able to soon head indoors where it was warm.*

*And I felt terrible. I cried all the way home. Because this was not in the promise I made to myself and to you when I was 17—to take care of you and not let you suffer because I was a young, single mom. That promise did not involve duct-taped shoes. It did not involve you being too cold. It did not involve me not having the resources to do anything about it. But I didn't have it. I just didn't have the money.*

*I was 30; you were 11. It was the first time I realized that I couldn't do everything on my own. It was the first time that I was not able to, but not the first time that I felt that doing it alone was fucking impossible. That day I also realized that promises, however well intentioned, are sometimes impossible to keep. You can't will them into being. You can only do your best. And sometimes your best is not enough.*

*I kept driving, back to the house we were renting in Seminole Heights—not the nice, historic part of Seminole Heights, but Southeast Seminole Heights, where the neighborhood was a bit rougher, where the houses were worn and had not been restored, where many were falling apart, and others, like the one right across the street from the place we were renting, were simply abandoned and serving as flop houses. Our neighbors asked us to join them in keeping watch over it for prostitutes and other people who liked to squat there. I drove through our neighborhood that day in my ten-year-old, single-mom-mobile with the left bumper that periodically starts to droop and fall off and the trunk lid that doesn't match the color of the rest of the car because I couldn't afford to have it painted after that person rear-ended us: hit and run. I drove through our neighborhood past the tattered homes after dropping you to*

*school with your duct-taped shoe, and as I drove I remember thinking to myself, ‘we belong in this neighborhood. We fit. We look like this neighborhood; except in the ways that we don’t . . .’*

*I thought, who are the other single mothers in this neighborhood? Women of color? Can they clothe their children? Do they have more than one child? Do their children have shoes? Warm clothes? Probably not. Do those mothers have a college education? A master’s degree? What has afforded me these things? Did they have a friend to buy their groceries when they were out of money (thank you Korrie Bauman)? Did they have a landlord who didn’t put them out on the street when they couldn’t pay the rent (thank you David Lee)? Did they have a perfect stranger, a mere acquaintance from a class, drive across town to pick-up their child and drive him to school when the car broke down (thank you Ellen Klein)?*

*In that moment I realized, I’m so lucky. I’m not doing this alone. So why does it feel like I’m supposed to? Why does it feel like failure either way? I felt at once the space of my privilege and the limits of my socio-economic situation. I felt the precarity of my situation, of our situation, of theirs. And I wondered, how much choice did I have in the making of this situation? How much choice do these other women have? I felt like an asshole for feeling sorry for myself, sorry for us.*

*But I still felt like shit because I couldn’t do anything about your shoe.*

*I’m sorry, Ben.*

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“Documentation III, Analysed Markings and Diary-perspective Schema” (DII) is also displayed in another row of plastic frames similar to those used with the dirty nappies, but there are not as many as in that set. In this section of documentation, there

are ten typewriter-sized sheets of paper, presented in landscape orientation. Many of the papers—take the one in the first unit for example—appear to be yellowing as paper does with age (see Figure 21).



Figure 21: Document 3 of 10 from “*Post-Partum Document: “Documentation III Analysed Markings and Diary-perspective Schema,”* 1975 (detail). Collection, Tate Modern, London.

The left, right, and bottom side of the paper in the first frame have a straight edge, but the topside is torn. The tearing and the color of the paper give the impression that this could be an old document of some sort, but a close-up inspection reveals words in typeface printed upon the page on top of what appear to be little kid scribbles in blue

crayon. The typeface indicates the paper is not old, and the little kid scribbles combined with the color of the paper make it seem more likely that this is some kind of craft or butcher paper—“construction paper”—ripped from a ream or book for a child to draw upon. This would explain the single torn edge.

There is a box printed on the paper containing three columns of writing. The columns are labeled, from left to right; R1, R2, and R3. The writing is physically separated into columns by two vertical lines that run from the top horizontal line of the box to the bottom horizontal line of the box. The writing within each column varies. The left column (R1) features 6 numbered sentences (1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6). The sentences in R1 are typed with a typewriter in uppercase and lowercase letters. Each sentence is single-spaced but followed by a double space between sentences. The middle column (R2) contains typeface writing as well, but in all caps. There are six blocks of writing in the middle column that appear to correspond to the six sentences in column R1, though they do not line up exactly. The right column (R3) contains a single handwritten paragraph of writing that extends across almost the entire vertical length of the first two columns. Each of the ten plastic frames in this section DIII contain a similar piece of paper with chart of three columns (R1, R2, R3) and the same type of writing in each column. Each paper also includes little kid crayoning, though the color choices here vary.

DIII contains transcriptions of Kelly Barrie’s early verbal expression (R1) placed next to Mary Kelly’s transcriptions of the “inner dialogue”(R2) that occurred for her in conjunction with Kelly Barrie’s verbalization. Both of these transcriptions are laid on the page next to handwritten diary entries of Kelly’s (R3) that detail the goings-on of their daily activities. Kelly explains that “The diaries in this document were based on recorded

conversations between mother and child during the crucial moment of the child's entry into an extrafamilial process of socialization, i.e. nursery school" (77), and they are thus significant in that they reveal how central the mother-child relationship is in the socialization and development of a child, but also reveal that mothers are not the only forces who socialize children. Children go to school—and in some cases children go to their mother's schools—where they have contact with others.

Table 2: A textual representation of the contents of in Figure 21.

<b>R1</b>	<b>R2</b>	<b>R3</b>
<p><b>3.1:</b> Come'n do it (wants to fly the kite)</p> <p><b>3.2:</b> Down dis, it's falling. (I'm pretending to fly kite)</p>	<p>I SAY IT WOULD BE NICE TO TAKE IT OUTSIDE AS IT'S VERY WINDY BUT IT'S ALSO VERY LATE SO I TRY TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT.</p> <p>AS I STARTED THIS GAME OF PRETENDING TO FLY THE KITE STANDING ON A CHAIR HOLDING IT AND MAKING SOUNDS LIKE THE WIND, NOW I'M STUCK WITH IT.</p>	<p><i>I've been concerned about his health since Tuesday when he drank half a bottle of liquid aspirin and we had to rush him to the hospital. (R insisted on treating his fever with it and he left it on the bedside table K was supposedly sleeping). Anyway, the doctor said he was all right, but that he did have bad tonsillitis. I wondered how long he'd had it and why I hadn't noticed myself. Sometimes I forget to give him his medicine which makes me feel really irresponsible or I just feel I wish it was all over i.e. he was all grown up, but my mother says it never ends, the worry just goes on and on. Since he wasn't well he's been staying home from nursery. Anyway, he has been saying 'not to school' everyday last week. I suppose I sometimes feel like that myself about going to work.</i></p>

The typed transcripts and handwritten journals are all imposed upon early childhood drawings that Kelly Barrie made in nursery school. Figure 21 is a sample of one of these diary entries. Kelly uses these diaries to give us a glimpse into the to daily,

mundane lived experiences of motherhood—worrying about the child being sick, the self-evaluation and self-criticism (“sometimes I forget to give him his medicine . . . makes me feel irresponsible”; “why hadn’t I noticed myself”)—while also showing how her son is present, always, and how it is this relationship, the presence of both mother and child, that makes for this particular experience of mothering. Kelly’s son is not just a (re)presentation in the document, but a co-producer of this relational text. In her introduction to the book *Post-Partum Document*, Mary Kelly explains her reasons for intentionally choosing not to present traditional/expected images of the mother-child relationship in this document: “it seemed crucial, not in the sense of a moral imperative, but as a historical strategy, to avoid the literal figuration of mother and child, to avoid any means of representation which risked recuperation as ‘a slice of life’”s(Kelly xxi). The absence of the expected, idealized image of mother and child is what makes the more nuanced aspects of the mother child relationship visible. Moreover, the inclusion of Kelly’s son’s actual compositions—whether they are the dirty diapers that he made or the scribbles of first writings—takes Kelly’s performance of motherhood beyond the kind of performance that merely states, “I am mother.” Instead, it says, “This is what mothering is. And he is the other part of it. The other part of this relationship.” This is what mothering actually looks like, what it feels like, what it is.

### **Mom’s School by Ben: A Translation by Summer (Ben’s Mom)**

Sometimes *Mom’s School* was both a reflection of the way Ben saw our relationship and a reflection of the way he wished our life could be. For example, in his Halloween edition (Figure 22), he portrays an interaction in which he attempts to persuade me to buy him a ready-made Halloween costume. The comic illustrates that he

was aware of the unlikelihood of such an outcome—he knew I would advocate that we make the costume. However, the comic also reveals that he did not fully comprehend *why* I could not provide him with one of the expensive (well, expensive for a single mother in graduate school who can barely afford groceries and cannot afford new shoes), store-bought costumes. He was unaware of the precarity of our financial situation. It seems like he understood my refusal as an outburst of impatience or

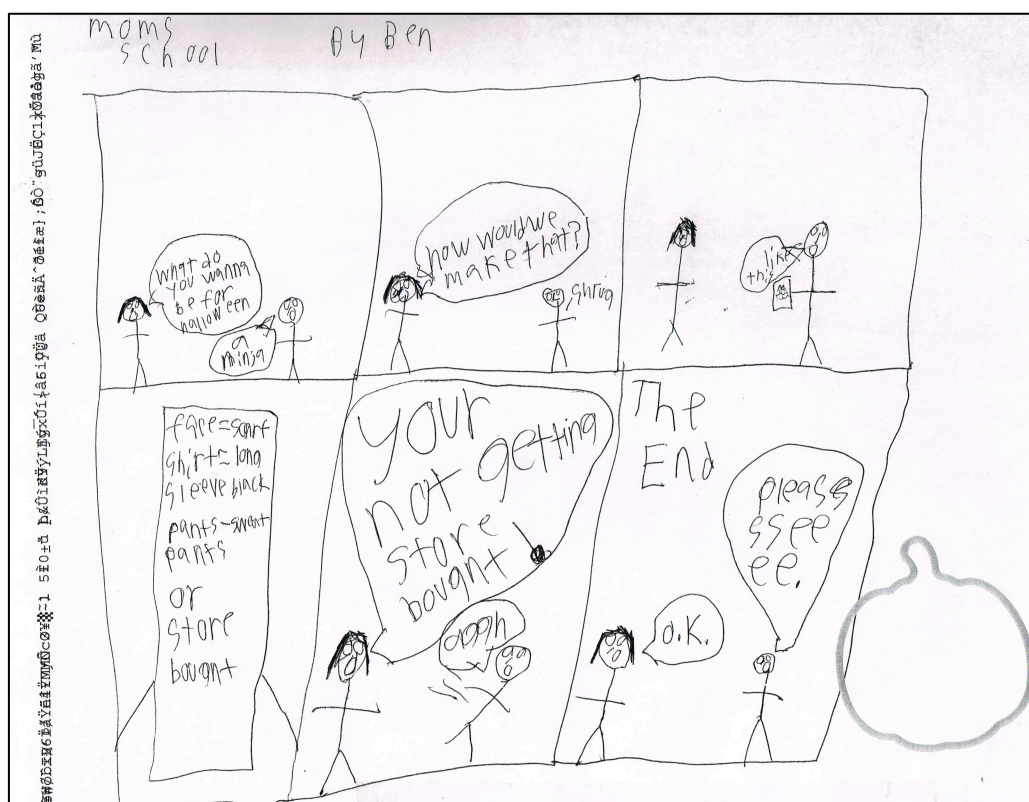


Figure 22: Mom’s School, “Halloween.” Reading frames from left to right:

**Frame 1:** Summer, “what do you wanna be for halloween” Ben, “a ninja!”

**Frame 2:** Summer, “how would we make that” Ben, (shrug)

**Frame 3:** Ben, “like this” (paper in hand)

**Frame 4:** (close up of paper) face=scarf, shirt=long, sleeve=black, pants=sweat pants; or store bought (meaning we could make our own with all these items or buy an already made costume)

**Frame 5:** Summer, “your not getting store bought!” Ben, “aggh”

**Frame 6:** Ben, “pleassssee” Summer, “o.k.” The End

(Festive, silly band pumpkin commemorates the season.)

perhaps just stubbornness as though I was playing the role of the mother who insists on teaching her child some manners. In the comic all he has to do is say “pleeeeeease” and his wish is granted. In reality, I did not (could not) buy him a costume that year; we made it at home. Then, a friend took him trick or treating because I didn’t have time—I was working on a paper or reading for class or doing some other task that was related to my academic pursuits. On the one hand, Benjamin’s comic is illustrative of the mother-child relationship and several of its requirements including the co-relational but asymmetrical relationship where the child is dependent on the mother. On the other hand, there was so much happening that it does not show, like the ways that others from within our community stepped in to participate in our lives by taking him trick-or-treating or watching movies with him so that I could work. I, as a single mother, the one who was supposed to be able to attend exclusively to his needs, did not always have the means to grant Benjamin his “wish” or fulfill his “needs;” it was often through the other relationships we established with our community that our needs were met. For example, the following email exchange (Figure 23) illustrate one of the many, many examples of when I felt like I just wasn’t enough for Ben, couldn’t do all the things for him and so, I asked for help:



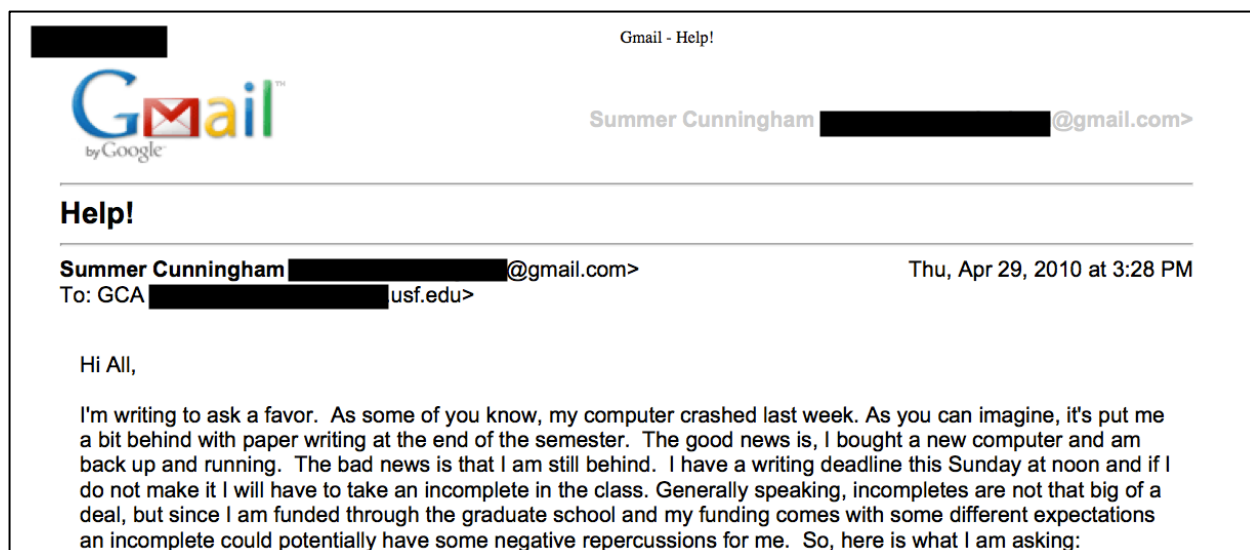


Figure 23: Email to the Graduate Communication Association listerv asking for help with Ben.

*Hi All,*

*As some of you know, my computer crashed last week. As you can imagine, it's put me a bit behind with paper writing at the end of the semester. The good news is, I bought a new computer and am back up and running. The bad news is that I am still behind. I have a writing deadline this Sunday at noon and if I do not make it I will have to take an incomplete in the class. Generally speaking, incompletes are not that big of a deal, but since I am funded through the graduate school and my funding comes with some different expectations an incomplete could potentially have some negative repercussions for me. So, here is what I am asking:*

*I know many of you are still trying to wrap-up your own end-of-semester work, but I also know that some of you might be close to finished. If anyone has free time this weekend, I am wondering if you might be interested in hanging out with Benjamin for a few hours? This isn't an absolute necessity; he is 12 and he can occupy himself, but I hate for him to spend an entire weekend alone (especially since this is how he has spent the majority of his weekends for the last month or so).*

*I would appreciate any help!*

*Thanks,*

*Summer*

These are the responses I received:

April 29, 2010 at 3:31 PM

*Summer,*

*J and I are taking the kids out to the beach Friday night and the park Saturday and Benjamin is welcome to join us for some or all of it.*

*K is planning to come with us tomorrow night if that makes Ben more comfortable.*

*Call me and let me know.*

\*

April 29, 2010 at 3:46 PM

*Hi Summer,*

*I'd love to help/hang out with Benjamin. I'm available pretty much all day Saturday, my boyfriend and I normally go see a movie in the morning on one weekend day, just \$5, we are thinking Clash of the Titans this weekend, then just hang out, play Wii, maybe if Benjamin's is interested, we could go canoeing at my mom's house on the river. There's also a free showing of Back to the Future outside by the Sulphur Springs Tower Saturday evening, with an appearance by Christopher Lloyd himself!*

*Let me know,*

A

\*

April 29, 2010 at 3:50 PM

*Hi Summer,*

*Sorry to hear about your problems with the computer, that is a ton of stress. I can watch Ben for a couple of hours on Saturday if you need me to. Just let me know.*

*Take care,*

*S*

\*

April 29, 2010 at 5:23 PM

*How would he like to hang out at the pool on Saturday. I have a party to go to at 4 which he can attend until like 7 pm then it becomes an adult only party. But he can spend the whole day on Saturday. He could hang out on Saturday too if needed. Just let me know.*

\*

April 29, 2010 at 7:01 PM

*Hey Summer,*

*I'll take him to the pool party tomorrow, and I think I might meet up with D and Ben for mini golf on Saturday. Call me and we can work it out.*

*Sincerely,*

*L*

\*

Moments like these—acts of kindness, friendliness and love that came from the community at large —were how Benjamin and I really were both able to make it through our most difficult times. It was not our special mother-child relationship that sustained us; it was all the other relationships that it also made possible.

\*\*\*

The documentation in this chapter—DII, DIII, mine, and Ben’s—perform together to bring forth issues of (in)visibility, presence and absence, relationships and community. These documents show that the idealized and expected images of the mother-child relationship are not so much an accurate reflection of the motherhood-child relationship, but a reflection of the discourse and ideology of the “good mother.” Such images act as masks, showing the way things are supposed to be and not necessarily how they really are. When the expected images are absent, as they are in Kelly’s work and in Ben’s comic, motherhood is unmasked and we are able to see motherhood differently because we see more clearly the parts of motherhood that we normally don’t see. We see not just the more nuanced parts of the mother-child relationship, but the ways that the exclusiveness of this relationship can foreclose on the possibilities for other types of relationships and also potentially open space for other kinds of relationships, new ways for being with others. Excursus B, “A Lonely Discourse,” offers an extended look into the experience of relational foreclosure that is part of the experience of single motherhood.

## EXCURSUS B: A LONELY DISCOURSE

### Prologue

This essay began as a personal narrative on being alone, but as I wrote my story and connected it to the stories and ideas of others, I began to realize that it moves from an essay on being alone to one on being (in conversation) with others. I then began thinking about the fact that I'm not just writing and thinking with others, but writing *to* others, which is another level of not being alone. Therefore, I can no longer call this piece by its original title, *On Being Alone*. Instead, I shall call it what it is, *A Lonely Discourse*.<sup>36</sup>

This story and its author long for your presence, but since you are absent we will settle for your consideration . . . of both the story and the performance of the text.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Pollock (Performative 'I') asks, "What if writing buried the sensuous reality of its object in the folds of an emerging subject? Could their twin becomings comprise a less alienated practice of performative knowing?" (250). I ask the same questions with regard to this essay as I consider the ways the idea for this piece becomes a sort of movement from a story about single motherhood, solitude, and (a)lone(li)ness to a story about writing and thinking with others, to a story about connecting to you, to . . .

<sup>37</sup> Pollock (Performative Writing) describes performative writing as "making not sense or meaning per se, but making writing perform. In Pollock's words, "writing as doing displaces writing as meaning" (75, emphasis original). Pelias (Performative) writes that "performative writing rests on the belief that the world is not given, but constructed" (418). So, here, I am asking you to think about what this text is doing. What does it make possible?

## A Lonely Discourse

*The discourse of Absence is a text with two ideograms: there are the raised arms of Desire, and there are the wide-open arms of Need. I oscillate, I vacillate between the phallic image of the raised arms, and the babyish image of the wide-open arms.*

-Barthes<sup>38</sup>



With her right hand, she reaches to turn the shower knob to the off position. The water ceases to pour over her now, though a steady drip, a couple of drops at a time, falls rhythmically from above. She stands there, hypnotized by the drip-drip beat of the faucet, lingering as the last cloudy vapors of warm steam rise up her legs, moving across her torso, finally caressing her face gently.

(Drip-drip.)

Barthes

She reaches back in her mind, trying to remember what it felt like to have the hands of another caressing her body, hands running through—maybe even pulling—her hair. She aches to feel the touch of soft lips against her lips, her cheek, the small of her back; aches to feel the comfort of strong arms surrounding her, pulling her in.

(Drip-drip.)

<sup>38</sup> In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes uses marginal references to credit the thinkers, friends, and writers who have influenced his thoughts. I think through this story and experiences with Barthes and many others, trying to make sense of my experiences and searching to find resonance in the writing and ideas of others. Like Barthes, “[t]he references supplied in this fashion are not authoritative but amical: I am not invoking guarantees, merely recalling, by a kind of salute given in passing, what has seduced, convinced, or what has momentarily given the delight of understanding (of being understood?)” (9).

She aches, aches . . .for someone else to make the bed, do the shopping, cook the meals, run the errands, and pay the bills.<sup>39</sup> To do the worrying.

(Drip-drip).

Most of all, she aches to fold her body into soft, cool sheets. Aches to lay her head upon a cloudy pillow, eyes closing gently into a long, restful sleep.

(Drip-drip.)

She reaches back, back, back as far as she can remember, but she can't remember the last time she's known any of these things. She'll have to settle for imagining them.

(Drip.)

(Drop.)

The drops drip more slowly, erratically, losing their rhythm. She reaches back with her left hand, and in one swift movement jerks open the shower curtain, and a rush of cool air shocks her back into the present. A present where she is alone.<sup>40</sup>

Alone.

Single.

Woman.

---

<sup>39</sup> Barthes kindly reminds me that, "Absence is the figure of privation; simultaneously, I desire and I need. Desire is squashed against need. That is the obsessive phenomenon of all amorous sentiment" (16). I remember that I have felt such privation even while present in a romantic relationship.

<sup>40</sup> You will also notice that there are entire pages with no names in the margin. That is because I was/am often alone.



The first time I saw you I fell instantly in love. Truth be told, I was already in love, already seriously and whole-heartedly committed before I ever laid eyes on you.

The first time I held you in my arms I was mesmerized by your presence, captive to your gaze, unaware that I was exhausted and starving. You looked up at me with clear eyes and furrowed brow, and I gasped—momentarily winded from the depth and intensity of your expression, so profoundly contemplative. You said, “*You feel familiar, but I am still unsure about this, about us.*”

To this day you often tell me the same thing.

The first night we spent together, I was so nervous. I had not anticipated being so nervous. What I mean to say is that, I was very nervous about the event itself, but didn’t realize I’d feel this anxious after. I couldn’t sleep so I watched you sleeping next to me for hours, monitoring the rise and fall of your chest, memorizing the most minute details of your face, wondering if you would open your eyes and catch me watching you.

It took several hours, but sometime that night, probably around the third or fourth hour of my sleep study of you, I finally recognized you.

It was *you*.

*You*, whose presence was first revealed in sensations of soft flutters, whose perpetual hiccups prevented sleep on tired nights.

*You*, whom I carried inside me for the past ten months,



who turned my world inside-out.

*You*, the love that had grown within me, a part of me;

the love that in turn made me grow.

It was *you*, my son.

Then, in a panic, afraid that you might not know me, I lifted you from the hospital basinet and held you gently against my chest so that you could hear my heart beating and also recognize me.

For the first two weeks of your life, we slept in this way: me sitting propped-up in a recliner with your head against my heart. For the first two weeks it was the only way we could both rest.



Single woman.

Child.

Mother.

Single mother.

She, the single-mother, stands naked in front of the bathroom mirror after her shower, and as the fog clears from the reflective glass she can make out her body, a body that is starting to look to her like an old body. A body that mirrors the way she feels. Stretch marks, once an intense lavender, now faded into an iridescent white, cover her breasts and belly. She cursed these marks when they started to appear during her pregnancy. Exploding brilliantly, the fluorescent striations raked and consumed the soft surfaces of her youthful body until it appeared foreign

to her. She abhorred stretch marks and all the other aspects of pregnancy that separated her from her peers, marking her teenage body in ways that teenagers shouldn't be marked: weight-gain, protruding midsection, swollen feet, gray hair.

But it was so many years ago that her body announced the truth of her situation in ways she could not conceal. Now, the faded marks are barely visible remnants of her teenage trauma and a muted memorial to what was perhaps the most miraculous experience of her life. Like the stretch marks, the other perceptible markers of her teenage pregnancy have faded from public view, though the reality of having a child so young, now invisible to almost everyone else around her, is still part of her daily experience.

She is living the part of teenage pregnancy that happens five, ten, fifteen years after the decision was made to keep the child. She is the story that happens after the afterschool special. They don't cover this part of the story in the after school special, or even on MTV's *Teen Mom*. Sure, everyone knows the story of the girl who gives up her childhood to raise a child of her own. But who really knows what happens after that, when the teenager grows up, becomes a woman? A woman who has been a mother ever since she was a child?

Single.

Woman.

Child.

Mother.

Single woman with child who mothers.

Single woman *with child* who mothers *alone*.



Today my life is like a scene from a movie –a montage scene with the William Tell Overture playing in the background. Picture this: It's 8:00 a.m. and there is this single mom running around the house, trying to be in ten different places at one time. The day has just begun, but she's already frazzled. She's dressed for business in a sharp suit and heels, and from the neck down everything appears to be OK, but her hair gives her away. It's in out of control. And in her haste to get the child up, dressed, and fed she's forgotten to apply lipstick to her darkly-lined lips, leaving her mouth better suited for a Halloween costume party than her upcoming day of meetings with tax consultants and human resource managers. No matter, no time. They have to leave now or they will be late.

Can you picture this? Except, imagine that it is you.

Ready. Set. Go!

- You drive through rush hour traffic, spill coffee in your lap in a futile attempt to wake up before you get to the office.
- You get the kid to school just in the nick of time, but by the time you arrive to work, you're late. You're running in.
- Things at work go badly:
  - You have to fire somebody.

- You've been working six days a week, sixty hours a week for the last month and a half
  - You are way behind. Things are slipping through the cracks left and right.
  - Even so, you are trying to have a good attitude about it, trying to keep up a good face.
- You work straight through lunch, hoping to leave early.
  - At 4:30 you get sucked into a meeting even though you need to be out of there by 4:45 because you have this meeting at you son's school which means:
    - You need to pick-up the kid
    - Get him home and fed and to the babysitter,
    - And then drive all the way back downtown (where his school is located conveniently next to your office) by 7:00 PM,
    - And the only way you can do that is if you leave work by 4:45.
    - Of course, the meeting goes until 5:30.
  - 5:30 hits:
    - You rush over to the kid's school,
    - rush in to pick him up.
    - Some parent is standing in front of the aftercare sign-out sheet,
    - She's completely blocking access to it, asking questions about payments, the weather, and other trivial matters.

- You try to interject, to go around her. This parent is unyielding.
- Her payments have nothing to do with the sign-out sheet, but for some reason she finds it necessary to be in front of the form, fully controlling all access to it.
- So now, another ten minutes have passed when the task of picking-up the child should've only taken about two minutes.

You get your six-year-old into the car, strap him in, kiss him on the head, and he says, “Mom, I need to tell you something. The letter you made to Auntie Candice and Auntie Katie that contained all those pictures from our vacation, well, you accidentally sent it to school with my art supplies. Ms. Mary gave them back to me to give to you but I’m looking in my backpack and they’re not there. So, maybe somebody took them out or they fell out somewhere and if that happened who knows where they could be? Oh, and, I’ve got pee on my sock, and, it’s in my backpack too.

“What?!”

“The pee sock. It’s in my backpack.”

“Son, which compartment of your backpack is it in?”

“You know, it’s in the compartment, with my lunchbox and my bottle of water.”

So now the kid has lost the pictures, which you can’t really blame on him because it’s only because you’re so scatterbrained that they got stuck in with his school supplies in the first place. You’re the one who actually delivered them to school, so essentially you’re the one who lost them. But

you're still kind of sad and bummed about that. Not only that, there's a peed on sock inside of your kid's backpack and it's touching his lunchbox where you put the food that you send for him to school every day, and it's touching the water bottle that he puts up to his mouth every time he needs to get a drink of water. So now you've got to sterilize the backpack. You've got to sterilize the water bottle and the lunchbox, you've got to wash the peed-on kid because the peed-on sock was obviously on his foot at one point in time and you've to get this kid fed and delivered to the babysitter by 6:30 in time to get back to his school by 7.

You're trying not to think about how the sock got peed on.

Trying not to think about the fact that you start school tomorrow and your whole day will consist of getting up and five o'clock in the morning, getting ready for work, getting the kid up, getting him ready for school, getting yourself to work, working all day without a lunch and going straight from work to pick up the kid only to drop him off with a relative so that you can go straight to school and finally arrive home sometime around 10:00 PM.

You're trying not to think about the fact that you haven't even purchased your books for school yet, that there's no way you'll have time to do that tomorrow, or the next day either because you have another class after work. You don't even know which class it is you have tomorrow or where it is at.

You are especially trying not to think about the fact that you've only seen your son for a total of about 25 minutes today, and that 90 percent of

that time was spent in the car where you tried to talk to him about how his day went while also trying to return several important phone calls in between pauses in the conversation because you will not have another chance to do so before the day ends.

You're trying not to think about all these things because you're now driving on the freeway in rush hour traffic, trying to pay attention to the road, or rather, you are finding it necessary to pay attention to the traffic on the road. You are so distracted by the traffic on the road that you don't have time to question where the road is even taking you.

And from somewhere, maybe the backseat of the car or the back of your mind, you hear a voice asking, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?"

You look beside you to the empty seat.

You look to the rear view mirror and see your son.

"Are we there yet? Are we there yet?"

And you respond, "Where are we going? And who is 'we'?"<sup>41</sup>



The single woman with child who mothers alone stands in front of the bathroom mirror blow-drying her wet, red hair. She is thinking about her life, love, and relationships.

She has made love on a sailboat at anchor under the light of the full moon; she has danced closely, seductively in the arms of the one she loved

<sup>41</sup> "Absence persists—I must endure it." (Barthes 16).

R.L. and also in the arms of strangers; she has cried out in ecstasy with words  
 F.R. unformed to an audience of no one. She has heard people profess their  
 R.M. love to her and has felt love in their gestures. In love she has known: a  
 J.W. K.N. foreigner, a dancer, a scientist, a writer . . . but never a partner.  
 Barthes  
 Flaubert  
 Plath Single.  
 H & N  
 You? Woman.  
  
 Mother.  
  
 Single woman with child who mothers alone.  
  
 Single woman with child who mothers alone and is sometimes  
 lonely.  
  
 People say things to her like: “Well, at least you have your son for  
 A.B. company. At least you’re not completely alone. You two are close, right?”  
 D.L. As if her son, a child, makes for an equal companion. As if life as a single  
 mom actually affords her any time to spend with her son.  
  
 She is anti-dependent.<sup>42</sup>  
  
 That’s what her therapist said. It’s the opposite of co-dependent.  
 Gornick It’s where you rely on no one. Or maybe it’s not a real condition at all, but  
 Cobb pejorative term by which to label someone who has no aspirations of  
 meeting prince(ss) charming and living happily-ever-after. A way to let

<sup>42</sup> Gornick writes about the difficulty of maintaining romantic relationships with men because of the ways her feminist politics and ideals often seemed at odds with her relational possibilities. She writes, “Independence, I thought, was what I valued above all else. But it was turning out that I had not understood the meaning of the word at all” (261). I read with her and I think of the countless times I prided myself on being independent, autonomous, or self-reliant. I wonder if, in truth, “I was alone not because of my politics, but because I did not know how to live in a decent way with another human being” (Gornick 259).



her know that something must be wrong with her if she does not desire marriage.<sup>43</sup>

Her sister tells her that she can't imagine her sustaining a long-term relationship, anyway. "You're too idealistic or elitist, an intellectual snob."

*I am not those things, she thinks. Am I those things? I love. I love!*

*Too easily, I love.*

Plath

Other people tell her she thinks too much about her son; perhaps she loves him too much. Makes him too much a part of her life, her work.

J.M.

They ask her things like: "What kind of work would *you* be doing if you didn't have a son," totally ignorant to the fact that they might as well be asking her to think about the kind of work she would be doing if she lived on Mars. Both questions are asking her to envision a life outside of her reality, outside of the realm of possibility. Even worse, both questions assume that she would *want* a certain kind of reality, that she would want a life on Mars or a life without her son.



Today I had a terrible day at work. There is needless conflict over my office space which has prevented me from using it for nearly the last

<sup>43</sup> Cobb (2007) thinks that being single should actually be considered another kind of "nonmajority" sexuality (446); a counter-sexuality, if you will, that [interrupts] the steely, enduring logic of the couple (449). I certainly feel as though I am evaluated from within the framework of this couple ideology. Indeed, I want to join forces with Cobb in his endeavor, and I hope my desire to partner with him does not contradict his critique of compulsory coupledness.

six weeks. My work has suffered. I am behind. It is April, the end of the semester is approaching, the deadlines loom.

I pick you up from school and the first thing you say is, “Mom, what are we having for dinner?”

“I don’t know,” I reply blankly, already dreading the prospect of figuring out something to make, then having to go to the grocery store to get stuff to make it since the pantry is empty due to our present time constraints, and then having to take more time to actually prepare it, and then, finally, having to spend the time cleaning up after.

As if you can read my mind you say, “Mom, I’m gonna take you out to dinner tonight.”

“What?”

“Yep, I’m gonna take you out to dinner. But I only have twenty bucks so keep that in mind.”

In the car, on the way home from dinner, I thank you.

You say, “Plan on it happening more in the future.”

I ask, “Why?”

You say, “I’m going to be older –and you are too but don't think about that– so I'll be able to buy your dinner more often. Get used to it.”

At that point I have to turn away from you for a moment because it feels like I’m going to cry. At that moment I realize that you are going to take care of me someday when I need you to. That you already do that now.



Woman.

Thirty-one.

Single.

Alone.

Lonely.

Alone, content.

Alone, confused.

The single, thirty-one-year-old woman who mothers a 13-year-old child alone puts down the hair dryer and stares again at her reflection. The stretch marks. She wonders if anyone will accept them, accept her. She wonders if she'll ever have the chance to see them stretch again.

It occurs to her that if something about her life doesn't change very soon, she will miss the chance of having more children. She realizes that the way she lives right now seriously decreases her chances of meeting someone and forming a meaningful long-term relationship.

She doesn't have time.

Holman Jones      And though she knows it is possible, she would never choose to do this again, alone. These thoughts cause a dull yet pronounced pain in her chest as if she's lost someone. *Can your heart ache over loves you've never known?*<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> I read Holman Jones's words: "She is someone's daughter, once in birth and once in adoption but she is not your child. You are not her mother. Still you say the words and you wonder if she

She's running out of time.

She struggles, sleeps not enough, can't pay all the bills, or buy new shoes for her son, nor can she figure out what she wants to be when she grows up:

A scholar?

A mother?

An artist?

A partner?

A lover?

A writer?

Plath She struggles to imagine the way to being all these things, wants to be too many things. Wants to need nothing! Wants to need no one! Though she's uncertain about whether this means that she wants to be alone.

Because she also wants to love, to connect, to collaborate, to relate. Because she wants to feel her heart race and her palms sweat and her stomach flutter when that someone special walks in the room. Because she wants her heart to be full.

She wonders how one can tell whether you want something because it's truly what you want or because it's what you've been told to want? If she is to be alone, she wants it to be out of choice, not out of circumstance. And right now it's very hard to know the difference.

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hears. You whisper in the moonlight the spiraling thoughts of another sleepless night" (Holman Jones 19) and I think to myself that the answer is yes. Yes, our hearts can ache for loves we have not known. And I also think, my heart alone does not ache; my heart does not ache alone.

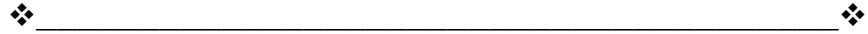
- The difference between control and fate.
- The difference between love and dependency.
- Barthes The difference between wants and needs.
- The difference between what is unknown and what is (im)possible.
- Cobb The difference between alone and lonely.<sup>45</sup>
- She puts the hair dryer away and reaches behind her for her robe.
- Her son is away today, having spent the night on an overnight field trip.
- This is the first time in months that she didn't wake early to get him to school<sup>46</sup>. And, though she misses him, she enjoyed sleeping in, enjoyed her long shower, and she is looking forward to the rest of her day in solitude. She has no plans to see friends or surround herself with people. Instead, she will stay home. She will read and write. She will play her guitar and sing. She is excited about being alone.
- Even if it means she will feel a bit lonely.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Cobb is also interested in defining singleness as a way of being that is not lonely or desperate –I am on board with this aim, although, as evidenced in this writing, I am unsure of whether I've figured out how to do that in my personal life.

<sup>46</sup> I am reminded of Rich from *Of Woman Born*: “my needs always balanced against those of a child, and always losing. I could love so much better, I told myself, after even a quarter-hour of selfishness, of peace, of detachment from my children” (Rich 23)

<sup>47</sup> Gornick writes on being alone, stating, “I am, simply, a person living a life partly that I chose and partly that chose me, a life that, though filled with friends and family and colleagues, is primarily one of solitude, one lived autonomously. And though this is far from ideal at all times—and though some days loneliness plagues me—for the most part, this is a life, my life . . .” (Gornick 263, emphasis original). As I read her words I find that I recognize the life she describes; it is my life, too.



## Epilogue

I have lived as a single mother, alone with my son, for almost the entire 16 years of his life, nearly half of my life. I have tried often, unsuccessfully, to explain to others how this experience has produced some of the most connected and most alienated moments of my life. My relationship with my son is one of the closest connections and deepest loves I have known, yet, this relationship –or rather—the material realities that result from our situation as single mom and child, often preclude my engagement in other kinds of relationships, and often times preclude my ability to relate with my son. As a single mother, I find myself in the weird paradoxes, at once longing to be alone and longing not to be lonely. This writing was an attempt to show you, my reader, what that feels like.<sup>48</sup>

This excursus is also about (not) being alone. The stories I have shared here are my own, but the experience of being a mother, a single mother, in contemporary Western culture is not my reality alone. Thus, I write sometimes in the third person to create a space to imagine the ways in which this experience and the feelings surrounding it might belong to other women as well.

<sup>48</sup> Many communication scholars have written on the virtues of sharing personal narratives in academic texts. More specifically, scholars have discussed the political importance of sharing stories from the margin. For further reading on making the personal political, please see Holman Jones (Autoethnography), Langellier, and Madison.

This piece is about (not) being alone in another way also; it is about connecting.<sup>49</sup> Lingis reminds me that “with words we connect with the words of others and with their lives” (63). So I write to ensure that I am not alone, to create connections and uncover the ties already there. I reach, stretch, *lean*<sup>50</sup> toward these connections; I remind myself that even as we write alone, we are writing with, to, and toward others, connecting our words and ideas. In this way, here I write as Barthes does, to an absent other, thus making the absent present. I also write *with* Barthes, and I also write *to* you.

I write to you. I use the second person to invoke you, my reader, as other. You, like the other of my written words and the other of my life are a present absence.<sup>51</sup> You are also wanted, desired and needed. This might seem like a one-way relationship. You can feel with my story and come to know me through these experiences, but what do I know of you? I suppose

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<sup>49</sup> Artist Mary Kelly writes about the choices she made about representing her story in her famous work *Post Partum-Document*: “Although the mother’s story is my story, *Post-Partum Document* is not an autobiography . . . .It suggests an interplay of voices—the mother’s experience, feminist analysis, academic discussion, political debate. /in the ‘Documentation’ and ‘Experimentum Mentis’ sections, the mode of address shifts to the third person. Here the Mother (she) is not longer accessible, so replete (not someone who is like, like you once were or would like to be). For the reader this implies a moment of separation (for some, perhaps an uncomfortable confrontation with the Father) or at least a ‘breathing space’ in the text” (xxii). Similarly in this piece, I over an interplay of voices and also use the third person to create a kind of separation, though, for me perhaps the separation offered a personal moment of comfort: a chance to be outside of my experience of mothering for a few moments instead of smack in the middle of a reality that is sometimes completely overwhelming.

<sup>50</sup> Pelias (Leaning).

<sup>51</sup> “Endlessly I sustain the discourse of the beloved’s absence; actually a preposterous situation; the other is absent as referent, present as allocutory. This singular distortion generates a kind of insupportable present; I am wedged between two tenses, that of the reference and that of the allocution: you have gone (which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you)” (Barthes 15). And so, you are here, too.

I do not know you. Though, if any part of this story resonates with you, then perhaps I do know you. Perhaps, it is possible for me to be alone, together with you.



### 3. A SPECIAL KIND OF SELFHOOD

**3. A special kind of selfhood reserved for women, and only women, who give birth to and/or assume responsibility as primary care-giver of (a) child(ren).**

Motherhood is a special kind of personhood. It is a state of personhood specific to women; indeed, a selfhood that is reserved exclusively for women who mother children. Motherhood is not solely special in terms of its gendered requirement; as a type of personhood, motherhood is *special* in many ways. Some people might feel that motherhood is special because it connotes, for them, a revered, sacred status; whereas others understand motherhood as a lower or degraded form of selfhood to the extent that one cannot really experience complete autonomy or realize full selfhood because motherhood is a type of selfhood where one is simultaneously both more than and less than an individual. Motherhood is a selfless selfhood: an impossibility. Not only is the understanding of motherhood as a kind of selfhood impossible, it is also incomplete. Motherhood is bigger than individuals.

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### Mom's School by Ben: A Translation by Summer (Ben's Mom)

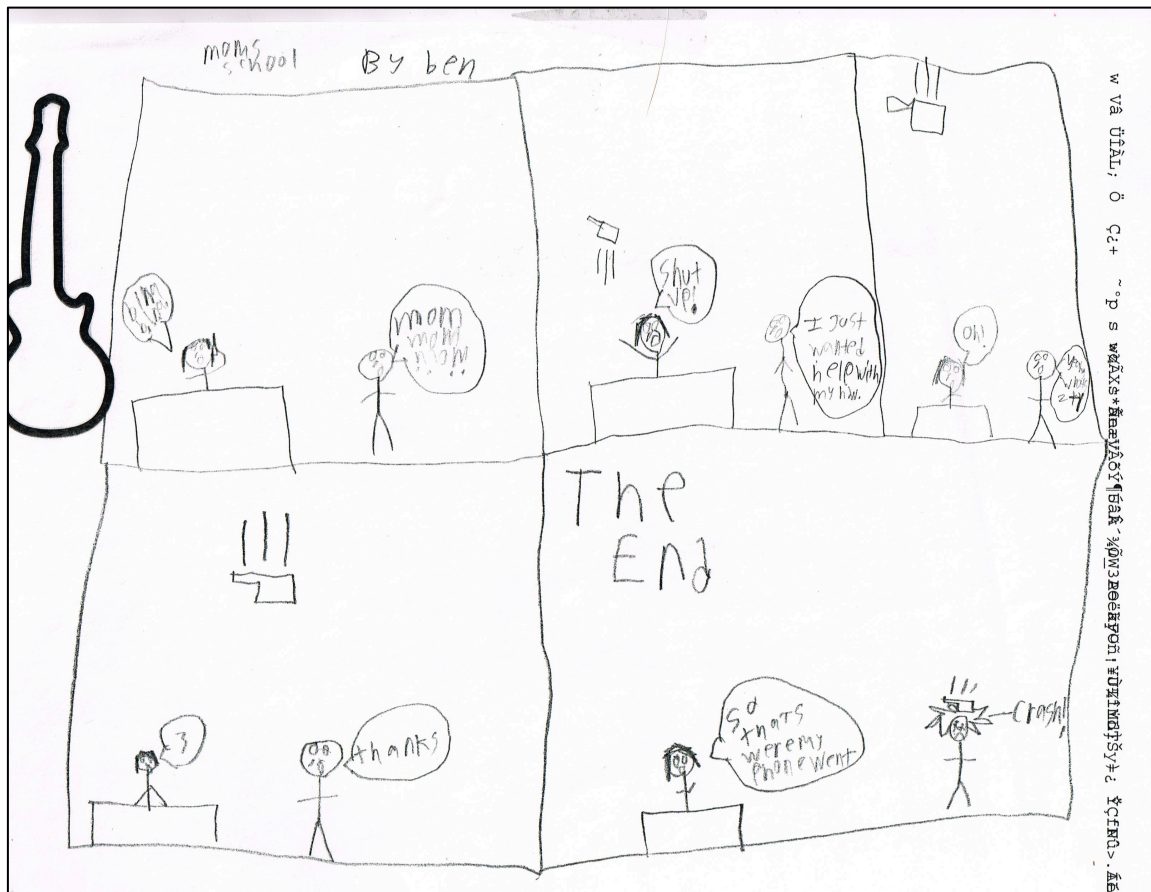


Figure 24: Photocopied silly-band-guitar is placed near Summer, who plays guitar, but not so much during her doctoral program because there isn't time. This placement could be intentional or coincidental. Reading frames from left to right:

**Frame 1:** Summer, “blah blah” Ben, “mom mom mom . . .”

**Frame 2:** Summer (throws phone in air), “shut up!” Ben, “I just wanted help with my h.w.”

**Frame 3:** (phone is heading back down) Summer, “oh!” Ben, “yeah whats 1+2”

**Frame 4:** (phone is getting closer to . . .) Summer, “3” Ben, “Thanks”

**Frame 5:** (phone crashes on Ben's head) Summer, “so thats where my phone went” The End

Simply rereading the comic above as I compose this dissertation evokes feelings of ambivalence with regard to my relationship to Benjamin and my role as a mother and a scholar. I am saddened that he perceived me as so mean and short with him—and embarrassed that what he wrote and drew in many ways captured the truth. Benjamin

was twelve when he drew that comic, but even though he is years older now and much more independent the story has not changed completely. As a matter of fact, just today as I labored on this chapter of my dissertation I was interrupted almost constantly and seemingly unable to finish a complete thought. I would no sooner sit down at my desk then I would see him lingering nearby out of the corner of my eye, ready to tell me that he needed me, needed something from me, again. Adrienne Rich writes of this experience in *Of Woman Born*:

From the fifties and early sixties, I remember a cycle. It began when I had picked up a book or began trying to write a letter, or even found myself on the telephone with someone toward whom my voice betrayed eagerness, a rush of sympathetic energy. The child (or children) might be absorbed in busyness, in his own dreamworld; but as soon as he felt me gliding into a world which did not include him, he would come to pull at my hand, ask for help, punch at the typewriter keys. And I would feel his wants at such a moment as fraudulent, as an attempt moreover to defraud me of living even for fifteen minutes as myself. (Rich 23)

Today I found myself fantasizing about leaving the house to work elsewhere, alone, which although is much easier to do now that he is older, is still not always possible because there remain things that I do need to do for this child—like supervise homework and chores and the making of food that during preparation could potentially set the house ablaze. Nevertheless, there are also so many things that he can be and *should* be doing for himself, and today he was bringing me those kinds of matters. You know, like ‘what should I have for a snack?’ Even though I’ve just stocked the pantry and fridge with groceries. Or, when he decides that right now it is urgent and pressing for me to

explain to him the meaning of life or the difference between faith and spirituality. And, do I think Gramma Carol will have a minute to talk to him about his plans for winter break even though it's only September? And, he would like to do something with his girlfriend this weekend, but would need a ride and also to borrow some money. Of course, none of these things seemed to be pressing for him or even remotely on his mind until I explained that I was working and it was very important that I have this time and meet a deadline. These conversations are frustrating and confusing. I mean, I am thrilled that my teenager wants to talk to me about the meaning of life, or anything at all given this age of parental disassociation, but I'm ready to go bonkers because I need, need, need to have this time to finish my work. It's as though when he sees me typing away furiously at my computer, practically buried beneath the stack of books on my desk, he doesn't see a person working. He just sees 'mother.'

Almost forty years ago Rich wrote that an unexamined assumption of motherhood is that "a 'natural' mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless;" (22). This assumption about motherhood still exists today, but it's not just that mother love should be selfless, it's that the mother love—the love you feel for your child(ren) and often (but not always) feel in return from your children—is in and of itself enough to sustain you as a human being; enough to compensate for all the work you do and all the things that you've given up.

It's not. Oh, and this love also doesn't put a roof over anyone's head, put food in people's mouths, nor does it provide cozy beds for napping on days when one is

exhausted. Mother love is wonderful, but it's not enough—as I mentioned in Chapter 2, it's not that it's not enough for the mother, but it's not enough for the children either. I love Benjamin more deeply than I have loved anyone, really. Beyond loving Benjamin, I actually like him. I think he is a cool person. He is easy to be around, super-caring, funny, and a great conversationalist. But expecting women who care for children to be fully fulfilled as human beings because they have children is not only an exploitation of the true feelings of love they hold for their children, but also a corruption of that love, a corruption that leads to feelings of ambivalence and even resentment.

How much it takes to become a writer. Bent (far more common than we assume), circumstances, time, development of craft—but beyond that: how much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one's right to say it. And the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, cleave to, find the form for one's own life comprehensions. Difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman. (Olsen 27).

Tillie Olsen published the above passage in her book *Silences* in 1976. For me it still rings true, particularly in my profession. I might change it, modify it to fit a bit better to my life—just the last line: *almost impossible for a mother, especially a single mother*. Because when is there time to *do*? To *think*? I do most of my thinking in the car in between work and picking Benjamin up from school. I have written entire papers there. I am sure I am not the only one.

The letter I wanted to write today:

*Dear Benjamin,*

*I love you. Please leave me alone. Please give your mother a break. Do the things without me today. Use the microwave. Use your best judgment. Check back tomorrow.*

*~Mom xoxoxo*

(I did not meet my deadline.)

### **Autonomous Subjectivity, Selfless Selfhood, and other Impossibilities**

In terms of selfhood, being a mother—in fact, being a woman—in contemporary Western culture is paradoxical and impossible. This paradox exists in part because of the modernist social imperative that people are or should strive to be rational, independent, autonomous beings. This conceptualization of subjectivity is rooted in Enlightenment thinking, but remains a prevalent ideal in contemporary US culture, sustained through neoliberal discourses that emphasize the virtues individualism—indeed, neoliberalism imposes a morality around the autonomous subjectivity. Under this morality, those in our culture who do not succeed on their own in work, wealth, health, etcetera are seen as solely to blame for their situations. Can't afford your rent? You're not working hard enough. Nevermind that you are working three jobs and well over the standard forty hours per week. Can't get a job? It is because you personally are lazy, and not that we are in a recession with a shortage of jobs all around. Having a hard-time balancing your career while being the primary care-giver to your child(ren)? Well, you must be a bad mother. When the ethos of individualism collides with the morality of *essential motherhood* it creates problems for women. All women.

As stated in Chapter 1, *essential motherhood* is one of the key aspects of contemporary good motherhood. DiQuinzio explains:

Essential motherhood dictates that all women want to be and should be mothers and clearly implies that women who do not manifest the qualities required by mothering and/or refuse mothering are deviant or deficient as women. Essential motherhood is not only an account of mothering, but also an account of femininity. (xii)

When motherhood is a standard of femininity, it means that *all women*, whether they have children or not, are measured by the maternal requirement: all women are expected to be mothers. Simone de Beauvoir puts it most concisely in the introduction to *A Second Sex* when she states simply: “Woman is a womb.”

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“Documentation IV: Transitional Objects, Diary and Diagram” (DIV) contains 8 imprints of baby fists—not handprints, fists—preserved in plaster. These are the closest glimpse of the physical image of Kelly’s son thus far in the collection of documentation. As with the prior pieces of *PPD*, the imprints are showcased in the plastic display cases known as Perspex units.

The handprints<sup>52</sup> are comforting because they are familiar and recognizable as childhood mementos, maybe even more recognizable than the scribbles in DIII as a “normal” moment from a childhood, or, a normal form of “mother’s memorabilia” as Kelly puts it. They are reminiscent of the plaster imprints of baby hands (and sometimes feet) often made of babies and young children in an effort to create a physical three-

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<sup>52</sup> Kelly calls them “hand plaques” in her book (97).

dimensional record of the tininess of a person. In fact, in the context of *PPD* as a whole, the plaster hand imprints are the most familiar index of the mother-child relationship as it is typically represented in Western culture. This feature lends *DIV* a familiar quality that makes engaging with this particular piece feel a bit more comfortable/comforting than some of the other sections of documentation.

Unlike traditional baby hand imprints, Kelly's imprints are actually imprints of fists—not angry fists, but rather, they look like what would happen to an imprint if the child's hand were not forced into perfect flat shape when pressed against the plaster and instead placed into the plaster in a more natural, relaxed state. So, even though the fingers are curled a bit into a shape that resembles a fist more so than a flattened hand, there is no tightness to the shape as there would be with a fist. In this way, even the hand imprints refuse the expectation of the idealized mother-child relationship.

Also unlike the hand imprints that you normally see that might be imposed with the child's date and age, these fists contain the imposition of some kind of chart. The chart creates a square box around the fist imprint, and like other sections of *PPD*, incorporates coding, mapping, and labeling; a nod toward and perhaps a critique of the official discourses that legitimize the creation of the production of knowledge and meaning making in Western academic cultures.

Below each box containing the clay imprint there is a ragged, fringed rectangular piece of cloth—actual scraps of Kelly's son's baby comforter. The width of the cloth is the same size as the width of the square that surrounds the hand imprint. The length of the cloth is about double the size of the square. There is a hole punched at the top of each comforter scrap; the hole is threaded with a thin piece of twine. A tiny piece of cardstock paper peaks out at the bottom of the cloth—it is perhaps a few centimeters long, just big



enough to contain a single line of type. As with the other pieces in the document, the cardstock appears to be some kind of coding. The first piece of cardstock reads T1 27.1.76 AGE 2.5: 'T' for transitional object, the date the print was made, and the child's age at the time. Figure 25 contains a sample of one of the documents from section DIV.

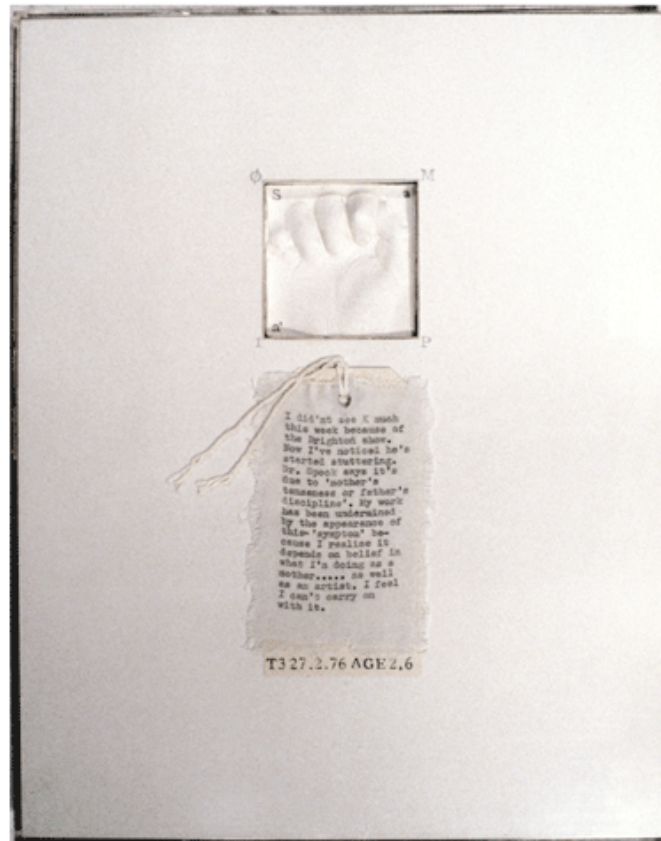


Figure 25: A hand plaque with comforter fragment diary from *Post-Partum Document: "Documentation IV Transitional Objects, Diary and Diagram,"* 1976 (detail). Collection, Zurich Museum.

The actual cloth itself contains diary entries by the mother; confessionals of her experience at this stage of mothering. As with the other pieces of documentation, these entries are typed right on top of the cloth itself. The mother's journal entries are preserved on an object that was once a comfort item to her child. Both objects, the

comforter scraps and the hand imprints, memorialize certain sacred moments in the mother-child relationship and are also reminiscent of the way that many mothers similarly memorialize moments of those relationships by saving items and documents. The items that were once a comfort to the child become items of comfort to the mother as the child transitions to other, more independent phases of life and the mother-child relationship also transitions. In this case, the documentation was created when Kelly Barrie was beginning nursery school and Mary Kelly was herself transitioning back to work. The irony of the diary entries, however, is that they do not reveal comfortable moments of motherhood at all, but instead point to moments and experiences of ambivalence of the subject position *mother*, and also highlight the guilt that one experiences when she cannot adhere to the role in the way that she is expected to.

*Excerpt from: T2 8.2.76 Age 2.5:*

*“Coming back from work this week, I realised that I wasn’t thinking about K so often when I was out, or walking faster as I got near the house. I felt a bit guilty ...”*

Here is an example of the mother experiencing an aspect of her identity that is not necessarily associated with her child: work (outside the home). She leaves her son and goes somewhere where she assumes the identity of worker, or, in Kelly’s case, an artist. One might expect that the mother feels compelled to rush home to her young child, particularly since it is evident based on the earlier sections of *PPD* that Kelly and her son spend much of their time together and have a close relationship. In fact, the mother herself feels that she is *supposed* to feel a desire to rush home to her child, and feels guilty because she does not experience this desire. She feels guilty that her thoughts are not of the child; guilty that she is not in any particular hurry to get home;

guilty that she is able to enjoy a life separate from her child. As Adriane Rich so poignantly points out in *Of Woman Born*, although “motherhood in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child, or children, it is *one part* of female process; it is not an identity for all time” (37). Nevertheless, when a significant portion of your life is spent caring for the needs of another, day in and day out, you can become incredibly attached to that individual and incredibly attached to your identity as a mother. In a culture where mothers are expected to be mothers first, foremost, and all the time, separating from a child, whether it is to go to work or for other reasons, can easily become an experience that feels wonderful, horrible, or confusing and contradictory to a mother.

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*Dear Benjamin,*

*Today you told me you do not want to live with me. You have told me this a hundred times before, but today was different. You sought a mediator to advocate for you, a professional. You told me you needed someone to talk to, so every week now for the last three weeks I brought you to this place. I sat alone in the semi-comfortable waiting room with the outdated furniture and the awful music playing in the background, and while you met with the therapist I wondered anxiously what it was you were speaking to her about. Today I found out.*

*You want to move 2600 miles away to live with your father, and just as you wanted, the therapist is on your side. The therapist says you are old enough to decide if you should go live with your dad. That you will resent me always if I don't let you go.*

*“Absolutely not,” I said.*

*I was outraged! She doesn't even know your father—how could she possibly know if this is a good idea for you? She doesn't know what I would be sending you to, what it would mean for your future. I hate your therapist; feel betrayed by this woman, a woman who would corroborate with you to ensure our separation and disconnection, who would have you relocated to live with a man that she knows nothing about. Yes, I hate her.*

*I hate her because I think she has a point.*

*You will resent me always if I don't let you go. This means so much to you. But you are fourteen: still so young. So naïve. Still my child, my responsibility. How can I let you go to a place where you will be on your own? You are not ready. Or, maybe I am not ready.*

*You are so angry that you are not speaking to me.*

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From a communicative perspective, the experience of negotiating the need for autonomy and the need for connectedness to one's relational partner can be understood in terms of dialectical tension.<sup>53</sup> All relationships—romantic, familial, platonic and so forth—navigate this kind of oppositional pull. For example, partners in relationships of choice such as friendships or romances desire to spend time with one another while simultaneously seeking out alone time. A desire for autonomy, which is particularly strong in contemporary Western culture, coexists with its opposite desire for connection and contact with the other person. The tension exists because partners desire different and sometimes competing levels for connectedness and autonomy. Thus, one partner might desire to be alone, while the other one wants to spend time together. The desire to

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<sup>53</sup> See Baxter and Montgomery, 1996.

be together or autonomous can vary from individual to individual and can also vary from moment to moment. It is not a static tension by any means, but one that fluctuates over time and over interactions. To maintain a “healthy” or balanced relationship, this tension must be negotiated in a way that is satisfactory to both parties.

The mother-child relationship poses unique challenges for negotiating this tension. Mothers experience conflict because, like everyone else, they need and desire to have time to themselves, but in our culture are expected to be selfless, putting the desires of the child first. Mothers are not expected (permitted?) to be autonomous individuals. If motherhood by definition is a relationship—a personhood that exists only because of one’s relationship to another, a child, then for a mother to perform autonomous selfhood is to reject motherhood, to fail in her performance of mother. Thus, pragmatically and theoretically speaking, autonomous selfhood is impossible. Further, even when the possibility of being without a child presents itself; autonomous subjectivity is still something not quite possible. Moments of childlessness do happen: for Mary Kelly it is shown here in DIV when she journals about returning to work and also in DIII and DVI when she writes about her son going to nursery school, and for me it is revealed in correspondence to Benjamin as the possibility of his moving in with his father presents itself. However, in both situations, autonomous subjectivity remains impossible in the Derridean sense: as something still not quite tangible, reachable or conceivable; it is a way of being that has not yet come into being, has not been realized or made actually possible. As Rich points out, “it is not enough to let our children go; we need selves of our own to return to” (37). The mother identity with its hyper-close relational requirements, creates not just a relational identity but produces a relational experience of subjectivity—when you are required to selflessly be for another, how does

or how can one develop a sense of an autonomous self? The ideal of this kind of selfhood is always deferred, always just out of reach, even when the mother is without the child.

For mothers, this experience of dialectical tension is intensified by a cultural contradiction: the social expectation that a mother, if she is a good mother, should desire to be with her child contrasted with the cultural expectation that she should also be a contributing member of society and hold a job or the very real need she might have for holding a job as a means of financial security and providing for the child. The social expectation that the mother should desire to be with the child produces feelings of guilt for mothers who do not desire or who cannot constantly be with their children. The journal entry in *DIV T2 8.2.76 Age 2.5* illustrates this guilt, showing that Kelly-as-mother is experiencing feelings of inadequacy over the fact that she was thinking of things other than her child. She feels guilty that she is not rushing home to him. In other words, she feels guilty for not feeling guilty about having time away from the child because she knows she is *supposed to* feel guilty when she is not the one taking care of her child.

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*Dear Benjamin,*

*So we made a deal. I heard myself say things I was sure I'd never say and agree to things that seem utterly disagreeable. I consented. You will go. But I get one more school year. That's the deal.*

*One more year to prepare you, a 14 year-old, to take care of yourself because you will need to know how to do a lot of things for yourself when you get to the place you are going. I get one more year to help you get organized with school. I get one more year to teach you to navigate public transportation so you can get places on your*

*own. One more year to teach you who and how to ask for help when I am not there, whom to go to when you're sick or need help with homework. I get one more year with you in my home, my daily life. One full year to think about what my life will be like when you are gone, to figure out what it means to be a mother without a child.*

*When the therapist asked if she could talk to me alone, she reassured me that even though I was worried and didn't want you to go, that it would be better if you were to do this with my consent. She warned if I tried to keep you from going, you were old enough to go anyway, that you might run away if need be. Then she said, "He might not go through with it you know? You've got a year. A lot can happen in year." And then she said something else that really got me. She said, "His going to live with his father might be really good for you. You've never had the opportunity to be alone. To do things for yourself. Actually, this could be really great for you."*

*I felt disgusted at the suggestion and simultaneously thankful that someone recognized a potentiality in me, a part of me, that is not mother. I felt a slight and fleeting lightness in the front of my chest at the suggestion of this possibility: hopefulness.*

*Not hopefulness that you would leave, but the kind of hopefulness that is only discovered in the midst of possibility brought on by change. The possibility of the unknown that lies in a potential future that never revealed itself before this moment. The possibility of becoming a different self than the future self that I'd previously imagined.*

*And then I felt horrible guilt. Oh, Benjamin, I don't think I can ever really tell you about this. Can a child imagine his mother as something other or more than a mother? Is it possible for you to understand that I simultaneously want you to stay*

*here with me, that I am going to miss you so terribly that I feel like I might not ever get over it, AND that I also just glimpsed the possibility of living up to my other potentialities and that felt really, really exciting?*

*Remember when you read Kate Chopin's "The Story of An Hour?" It's kind of like that. It's not that the woman was glad that her husband was dead, but that she felt freedom when she realized she would no longer be a wife. Can you understand that it's not about my feelings toward you at all, but really about the way 'mother' works in our culture? It does not leave very much room for other potentialities for women.*

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*Excerpt from T5 20.3.76 Age 2.6:*

*"K's aggressiveness has resurfaced and made me feel anxious about going to work...Maybe I should stay at home. . . but we need the money."*

Here we can see that the mother feels like her child's behavior is her responsibility. If he is acting out, she is to blame. In this case, her absence is to blame. Also, we see in this case, as is the case for many mothers in Western culture regardless of class or race, that Kelly must work to financially help support the family. Is it possible to know if she wants to be home with the child for the sake of being home with the child, or is she just feeling guilty because she's not doing what she's supposed to? Of course, what she is supposed to do is take care of her child by simultaneously being physically present with him and simultaneously working to support the family: another impossibility of motherhood.<sup>54</sup> The excerpt below details another instance of the total responsibility of motherhood:

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<sup>54</sup> The idea that women can "have it all" is a big driver of this impossible situation in contemporary U.S. culture, and Americans seem to take this belief to heart as evidenced by



*T5 20.3.76 Age 2.6:*

*“. . . I feel ‘ultimately responsible’. For what?..not for discipline of Doctor’s appointments or even the shopping, but for providing ‘love and attention’. I feel...or I need to feel...I’m the only one who can meet this demand and I remember when I realized it.. the first time K said ‘I love you, Mummy’.”*

Here Mary Kelly is feeling like the responsibility of caring for a child always falls unto her as the mother. This diary excerpt also indicates another contradiction experienced by the mother. At once she feels a weight of responsibility that it is her duty exclusively to provide “love and attention” to the child while contradictorily there is part of her that desires or feels fulfilled by that exclusivity. There is a reward in the exclusive specialness that is perhaps akin to the feeling of being a superhero; that is, being the only one with the power to fulfill the child’s needs.

The myth that mothers are the only people who can care for and comfort children masks the reality that other people can and do care for children.<sup>55</sup> It is not necessarily a

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the controversy that stirred when Ann-Marie Slaughter published her article “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All” in the July/August 2012 issue of the Atlantic.” Literature on contemporary motherhood identifies social discourses that perpetuate this impossibility while also promoting the expectation that working and being available to your child(ren) 24/7 is actually possible. First there are the expectations of “intensive mothering” (Hays) and “total motherhood” (Wolf) and the “new momism” (Douglas and Michaels) all of which represent the cultural ideal that mothers, all women really, are and should be first and foremost mothers who are completely self-sacrificing and dedicated to their children. When the ideal of total mother combines “ideal worker norm” and neoliberal ethos of individualism, it is expected that mothers can and indeed should do it all. If a mother falls short, it is because she is deficient in some way, not because the requirement is impossible. For example, see Bochantin and Cowan.

<sup>55</sup> For example, Nancy Chodorow made this argument years ago. Her critique focuses on the way foundational psychoanalytic thought, and Freud in particular, originated and perpetuates the myth of exclusive motherhood. She argues other people as caregivers are perfectly capable of providing children, young children specifically, with the kind of love

problem nor is it untrue that there often exists a very special relationship between a mother and a child, but when specialness is used to justify the exploitation of only certain people's labor, time, and liberty, it is problematic, particularly when others in society benefit from this arrangement but do not have to acknowledge their privilege. The "specialness and sacredness" functions to devalue the actual work that goes along with the role of mothering, and works similarly to discourses that are deployed to justify unfair compensation for people who "choose" employment in certain professions like teaching or art, professions that might be considered rewarding in their own right. Teachers, like mothers, provide valuable services to society as a whole, but are not compensated accordingly. Compensation in the form of a child's love, be that of a pupil or offspring, in no way puts a roof over one's head or food on the table. The shitty work, the sleepless nights, and other negative aspects of caregiving need not fall solely to one person when these tasks could be shared with others. Moreover, other wonderful experiences, learning and growing experiences, that result from spending time with children could also be shared and enjoyed by others

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*Dear Benjamin,*

*When I think about you leaving I feel terrified—for you and for me, but mostly I feel sad. Deeply. Something special is about to end, something that has been so dear to me, and I am watching it happen in slow motion, and even though I want to, I feel as though I cannot change the outcome. It's not just that I'm losing you, but that it feels like I'm losing us at the same time. This awful, suffocating sadness is perpetually*

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and care necessary for healthy development. See Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Motherhood*.

*stirring in my chest as I walk around doing the day-to-day stuff. Sometimes I find myself literally gasping as if I'm out of breath and then I stop, close my eyes, take a few deep breaths, and I see all these bits of our life together, flashes of moments:*

- *The first flutter of you in my belly.*
- *The way you furrowed your brow the first time I looked into your eyes. The way your head smelled when you were a baby.*
- *Sneaking you into work when you were three because the childcare fell through (and knowing that the childcare who fell through is the person who I am not supposed to send you to).*
- *Bringing you with me to grad classes to the dismay of some students and professors and the joy of others. Bringing you into the classes I was teaching—the students asking when you would come back.*
- *Dropping you off to the sitter and running to the car so I wouldn't have to hear you crying after me. The day I tore off my mirror and scrapped up the side of my car because I was so upset and distracted as I was pulling away.*
- *Watching you play Duplos with your Gramma Rachel right before she died, her head almost completely bald from the chemo. You were oblivious to what was about to happen.*
- *The way your little face looked when you were three, rosy-round cheeks pressed against the glass of the airport window, pudgy hand waving, tears streaming as my plane pulled away from the gate and you realized I was really going to leave, really going to travel somewhere without you.*

- *Dancing together in the dark with glow sticks from the dollar store—cheap entertainment for a single mom and son on a Friday night.*
- *Your batman shoes!*
- *When you were six and used to sing “Hava Nagila” with Harry Belafonte in a ridiculously deep but completely serious voice in the car every morning on our way downtown to your school and my work.*
- *The day I picked you up from school after you fell on your face in the gravel. Trying not to scream when I saw the horrific disaster that was your face.*
- *Your Tai Kwon Do forms and your amazing splits.*
- *Teaching you how to rock step, triple step, triple step so we could swing dance together.*
- *Reading together for years and years every night before bed.*
- *Colorado. Germany—the lederhosen from Kerstin and the castles. France. Spain—the epic ice sculptures in Madrid. Canada—you called it “Canadia.” The zombies we ran into on the train in Toronto. The time we hiked up to the falls in Yosemite and learned you were afraid of heights only when we turned to hike back down and you attached yourself to my leg.*
- *Taking you for night drives so that you would fall asleep in the car. The day you fell asleep in the car and I realized it would be the last time I would be strong enough to carry you, a sleeping Benjamin, inside.*
- *Performing with you at ASU, USF, MOSI and at NCA. Watching you perform at USF, and Learning Gate.*
- *Our first sunset on a Gulf beach.*

- *The day you got in trouble in Science class because you added the Death Star and X-wing fighters to your ‘Cycles of the Moon’ poster. “It made the poster so much better, Mom.” How could I be angry?*

*Benjamin, thank you.*

*Thank you for all these gifts you have given me. For what you have taught me about life and love. For giving me the opportunity to see all things anew again. I hope that someday you will appreciate what I tried to give to you, and I hope you will realize that even though I was doing my best to teach and guide you, I was just learning, too.*

*And now, I have to let you go. I have agreed. I promised you just like I promised 15 years ago that I would always take care of you no matter what. I am worried that this new promise breaks the first one.<sup>56</sup>*

*I can't believe you are leaving. I feel sick. In my stomach and in my heart.*

### **How Are Mothers Made?**

*Age 3; 10, July 13, 1977*

*(8:00 P.M. coming into the bathroom)*

*K. Do babies come from bottoms?*

*M. No, . . .from vaginas. Girls have three holes; one for poohs, one for wees, and one where babies come out – that's the vagina.<sup>57</sup>*

In the introduction of the book *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly explains that one of her aims with *PPD* was to “to show the reciprocity of the process of socialization in

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<sup>56</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, part of the possibility of the promise is the possibility of the broken promise, thus keeping the promise is always also an impossibility. In this particular moment, the initial promise made was broken, but a new promise was made, that set into motion new conditions of im-possibility.

<sup>57</sup> Transcribed dialogue from L9 (Kelly 148)

the first few years of life. It is not only the infant whose figure personality is formed at this crucial moment, but also the mother whose ‘feminine psychology’ is sealed by the sexual division of labor in childcare.” (Kelly, 1). Of all the six sections of documentation, “Documentation V: Classified Specimens, Proportional Diagrams, Statistical Tables, Research and Index” (DV) offers perhaps the most obvious visualization of this socialization process, although the connection isn’t obvious at first. Most noticeable at first are the items pinned to mounting blocks: beetles, moths, a snail. But not just insects: a leaf, flowers, a spider. These are a collection of items found in nature by a child. The items were presented as gifts to the mother, but are also reflect his inquiries about the world, life, being.



Figure 26: Mounted objects with accompanying transcription and index from *Post-Partum Document*: “Documentation V, Classified Specimens, Proportional Diagrams, Statistical Tables, Research and Index,” 1977 (detail). Collection, Australian National Gallery, Canberra.

DV is presented in eleven triplets of the same size 9 x 12 Perspex units used to display the contents in each of the preceding section of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*. Each triplet consists of the following from left to right: The far left unit of each triplet appears different than the other two. It is made of a medium brown, wooden material, either corkboard or particle board of some sort, while the two units to the right of the first appear to be white sheets of paper with images and text printed upon them.

### **Left-side Units**

The brown units on the left, the first unit in each triplet, display an item—a scientific “specimen”<sup>58</sup> of research—that is adhered to the kind of wooden mounting blocks that might be used to pin an insect for an entomology collection. The date when and location where the item was found is stamped upon the wooden mounting block just to the right of the mounted specimen. Below the mounted specimen, the following information is catalogued: scientific name, common name, date, and habitat.

### **Center Units**

The content of the center unit of each triplet corresponds to the specimen mounted in the left-side unit. The top one third of the unit is dedicated to the display of a photocopied<sup>59</sup> image of the actual item that is mounted to the block of the left-side

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<sup>58</sup> Kelly actually refers to the bugs, flowers and other found items as “specimens,” but points out that they were not gathered using an actual scientific procedure, “but were determined by the child’s spontaneous investigations of things in his everyday life” (113).

<sup>59</sup> These figures are actually photocopied, not printed from a printer, onto the page. Kelly indicates this in her book, *Post-Partum Document*, though she does not indicate where she found the original images that she uses for the photocopy. I use the term photocopy to indicate that this was part of the process for how this piece of documentation was constructed, though I do not wish to assign a particular significance this aspect of the

unit. This image is imposed upon a square graph of coordinates. For example, the mounted item in the second triplet of Perspex units is a flower: a buttercup. Thus, a photocopied image of a buttercup is imposed upon the coordinates of a graph in the upper center of the center unit. The graphed buttercup is labeled “Fig. 2a” to indicate that it is the first figure in the second triplet of documentation DV. Just below the figure label, the item is assigned with a research number. For example, the buttercup, as part of the second triplet of Perspex units, is Research II. The species or subject under research is also indicated on the same line as the research number, but what is interesting is that the subject that is being researched is not the angiosperm *Ranunculus acris* (the scientific name for buttercup), but the species *homo sapiens* (F): the female of the human species. In fact, the human female is indicated as the researched species in each triplet, regardless of the mounted specimen.

In addition to the graphed image and typed research number/ subject, there is one last section of information contained on the center unit of each triplet: a short, transcribed paragraph of dialogue that begins with the age and date of child, presumably, at the age the dialogue occurred. For example, Research X, Center Unit contains the following:

*Age 3; 11 August 12, 1977*

*(2:00 A.M. coming into our bedroom)*

*K. You aren't kissing her on the lips are you?*

*R. Yes. . . (laughing) we're making a baby.*

*M. Oh Ray . . .don't say that.*

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construction, other than to remind the reader that this was before the days that you could print an image that you found on the Internet from a computer.



K. *I don't want to sleep in my room. There's ghosts and snakes and spiders and crabs up there.*<sup>60</sup>

These snippets of dialogue each show a conversation where the child is inquiring about sex, sexuality, or being. The juxtaposition of the these snippets of dialogue with the various scientific specimens collected by the child show how the child is simultaneously questioning all aspects of the world around him. Indeed, it was significant to Kelly that her son's particular investigations of the physical world "coincided with his questions about sexuality"(113). The found items—flowers, snails, bugs—as well as these conversations are each in their own way different modes of questioning and learning about what it means to be in the world—research about *being*. As Kelly explains, the specimens "were not selected according to a scientific procedure, but were determined by the child's spontaneous investigations of things in his *everyday life*" (113, emphasis added). Indeed, children, who are constantly inquiring into the happenings of the everyday, can remind those of us fortunate enough to be in relation with them of those things we take for granted in the everyday. What assumptions do we hold? What stories do we tell ourselves? How do we understand and explain being in the world?

The collection of transcribed conversations throughout this section also reveals that it is the mother who is responsible for educating the child on this topic. It is through the mother-child relationship that the very workings of life are not quite revealed, but, rather, (re)created. It is through this relationship that mothers are created. These shared moments of inquiry potentially create an opportunity for the mother to reflect on her perceptions and assumptions about life, being, gender, etc.

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<sup>60</sup> Transcribed dialogue from L10 (Kelly 152).

Kelly herself proclaimed that the found items, the specimens, displayed in this section of documentation were “gifts from the child” (113); things that have no inherent value “except [to] the mother.” Perhaps the real gift that the child brings is the gift of learning to see the world anew; the gift of reminding us that we could be and should be questioning, too. Nevertheless, even if a mother does not realize this as an opportunity, Kelly’s work in this section of documentation certainly gives the viewer a reminder of how knowledge gets constructed, who has authority in that process, and what possibilities exist in the space between what is found, what is gifted, and what is said, and perhaps what is unsaid or cannot be spoken. In the excerpt below, we see Kelly navigating a conversation with her son about pregnancy. In response to his inquiry as to why he cannot have a baby, she begins to tell him that only mothers have babies, but then changes to ‘ladies’ instead. In one sense she shows us how the link between and/or conflation of womanhood and motherhood happens in everyday conversation—indeed DV shows us how this link gets established through everyday talk and through scientific discourse. On the other hand, this dialogue illustrates the way that babies produce mothers. The logic of Kelly’s sentence might be read: Ladies have babies, and then they are mothers. But might it also be interpreted: *All ladies have babies?*

*Age 3;1, October 17, 1976*

*(4:00 PM talking to Elona, who is pregnant)*

*K. Why don't I have a baby?*

*M. Only mummies . . . ladies have babies.<sup>61</sup>*

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<sup>61</sup> Transcribed dialogue from L6 (Kelly 136).

## Right-side Units

Finally, the third, right-side unit of each triplet, much like the center unit of each triplet, is composed of a sheet of paper that displays a photocopied image at the top center of the page. The images in the right-side units, like those in the center units, take up approximately the top third center of the page; in fact, the placement of the graphed images in the right-side units are virtually identical to the placement of graphed images from the center units. Additionally, the images in the right-side units are also plotted onto a graph or statistical table of some sort, and the labeling of these images corresponds to the labels of the figures in the center units of each triplet. So for example, the photocopy of the buttercup is “Fig. 2a,” thus, the image in the right-side unit of the buttercup triplet is labeled “Fig. 2b” to indicate that it is the second figure in the second triplet.

Unlike the photocopied figures of the second units of the triplets, the photocopied images presented in the third units are difficult to decipher initially, perhaps because in most of the units, the images presented therein are partial; pieces of a larger image. Some of them contain labels that point to a portion of the picture: bladder, urethra, breast, placenta. One triplet (Fig. 6b) clearly contains the image of an almost fully developed fetus in utero. If you were to assemble all of these partial pieces together, all of the “Fig. b”s, they would form “a single diagram of a full-term pregnancy” (114).

Below each figure in the right-side units, there is list of words, an index. Kelly explains that “the Index attempts to speak to/through the lacunae of mother’s answers, but it is circumscribed by a system of representation which outlines an inherent pathology of the female body” (p. 114). The index contains words, scientific terms, that correspond, represent, or are affiliated with the Homo sapiens (F); the human female.

For example: ABDOMEN, ABNORMAL PREGANCY, ABORTION; BABY, BACKACHE, BEARING DOWN, BIRTH CANAL, BIRTHMARKS; CEASARIAN SECTION; DELIVERY DATE, DELIVERY, DELIVERY POSITION, DEMAND FEEDING, DIAPHRAM. Thus, the index of each triplet is the index of the human female; a list of things that, from the perspective of science, are indicators of femaleness. All of the words, in one way or another, affiliate being a human female with reproduction. Thus, Kelly shows how scientific discourse constructs the female of the species, officially and “naturally,” to be all about reproduction; the female of the species’ purpose is reproduction.

When viewing the center units and right-side units together, one can begin to get a feel for a call and response type of relationship between the two units. The child’s research questions are posed, the mother answers them as best she can, but somehow her responses are incomplete. The right-side units with the image and index fill in some of the gaps. The call and response between the units also illustrates how meaning—in this case meanings surrounding gender, sex, sexuality, being and reproduction—gets culturally constituted: in various interactions again a cultural backdrop of various technical, official and popular discourses. The call and response across the units of DV, between the child, mother and scientific research can be read something like this:

*(Where do people come from? How does it happen?)*

BLADDER, URETHRA, SYMPHYSIS PUBIX, PLACENTA, UMBILICUS,  
BREAST

*What is the female of the species?*

(ABDOMEN, ABNORMAL PREGANCY, ABORTION

BABY, BACKACHE, BEARING DOWN, BIRTH CANAL, BIRTHMARKS

CEASARIAN SECTION

DELIVERY DATE, DELIVERY, DELIVERY POSITION, DEMAND FEEDING,  
DIAPHRAM

*(What is being female? A woman?)*

HEADACHES, HORMONES, HYMEN

*(What is a woman? A mother?)*

LABIA MAJORAs, LABIA MINORA, LABOUR; PREGNANCY

*(What is a woman?) A mother.*

### **Disagreement about Sexual Difference**

A key and persistent dilemma in feminist theorizing that impacts scholarship and activism surrounding issues of maternity is what feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz refers to as “the debate between so-called feminisms of equality and feminisms of difference” (“Sexual Difference”). This struggle is also sometimes referred to as the dilemma of difference. The root of this disagreement is in the idea that social inequality originates at the point of, or in the very least is connected to, sexual difference:<sup>62</sup> some members of the human species have the capacity to grow and bear new humans; others do not. The maintenance and reproduction of society, culture, and the species is dependent upon and therefore organized socially around these (in)capacities. Thus questions of maternity and reproduction are at the center of this disagreement and in many ways at the center all feminist politics. More specifically, the debate to which Grosz refers, then,

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<sup>62</sup> Questions and dilemmas of difference are by no means limited to conversations about sexual difference; however, for the purpose of this discussion I will focus on this particular difference. While it is certainly not appropriate to stop with this form of difference and it would be remiss not to acknowledge that there are many other types of difference, sexual difference is not only most pertinent here, but also the best place to start with difference if we consider that “[s]exual difference is ineliminable, the condition of all other living differences” (Grosz, *Becoming Undone* 103).

is over whether feminist thinking and strategizing is best served by invoking reasoning along the lines of difference (i.e., sexual differences are real and different people merit different treatment) or better served by a politics that advocates equality by either denying that difference really exists (for example, arguments that difference is socially constructed) or by eradicating it (either at the biological or social level). This disagreement is by no means as cut and dry as is suggested by the simple dichotomy of difference versus equality. In what follows, I discuss some complications of this disagreement, first offering a general account of the way in which sexual difference creates inequality and oppression. I then discuss limits and obstacles for addressing the difference problem with sameness and equality, and, finally, I discuss the possibility for approaching problems connected to sexual difference using difference itself.

### **The Evils of Biological Determinism and Essential Difference**

Many feminist thinkers, along with gender and queer theorists, have taken great strides to show that sexual difference is socially constructed. Such theoretical moves are typically an effort to counter essentialism. Grosz defines essentialism as a belief in “the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization” (“Sexual Difference”). She identifies four different types of essentialism that are interrelated though they are invoked in slightly different ways: essentialism, biologism, naturalism, and universalism. Although there are some notable variations among the types of essentialism, what is most relevant to feminism and issues of reproduction specifically is that essentialism is often used to justify or rationalize given social arrangements that marginalize women. In short, sexual difference is conceived as natural, social differences

are also perceived as natural. Thus, even feminist politics such as those that view women's maternal capacity as a source of power are risky because they are rooted in a reproductive difference that has been used historically to subjugate women.

So, if difference creates the problem of social inequality and oppression, then reason would indicate the solution is to be found in sameness or equality. Thus, social constructionist approaches to sexual difference do not merely make claims that sexual difference is constructed, but show how (sexual) difference is constructed in ways that create and reify inequalities and oppression of all kinds, but particularly those connected with sexuality and gender. For example, Kessler's essay "Defining and Producing Genitals" provides an excellent and troubling account of the way in which contemporary beliefs about sexual difference help rationalize medical decisions that lead to the mutilation of (newborn) bodies. Kessler's piece and the work of other social constructionists have shown that sex, at the level of anatomy, biology and even physiology, is complicated and our unwavering cultural adherence to a binary two-sex system creates effects that are real, embodied, and forever impact individual lives.

Nevertheless, a risk with social constructionist approaches is that they can create a frame so rooted in discursive creation of reality that we forget that there are real, material differences in bodies, particularly at the level of reproductive capacity, and not attending to those differences, their specific capacities and the contemporary social significance of those capacities will not result in an emancipatory politics.

### **Countering the Evils of Difference with Equality**

When sexual difference is understood as the origin of social power differences, it makes sense that, historically, feminist and other thinkers and activists have sought to

neutralize differences by appealing to equality. For example, Shulamith Firestone is famous for her thinking when it comes to addressing issues of sexual inequality. She saw sexual difference in terms of class, with women occupying a lower class than men. She, as do many other notable feminist thinkers (including de Beauvoir in her materialist analysis of gender inequity in *The Second Sex*), locates the root of women's oppression in reproductive biology. Firestone explains that, "unlike economic class, sex class sprang from a biological reality: men and women were created different," but goes on to say that "this difference of itself did not necessitate the development of a class system—the domination of one group by another—the reproductive *functions* of these differences did" (23). For Firestone, men and women are biologically different, the most significant difference being that women have been enslaved by their particular reproductive function because their bodies are capable of and, therefore, required to reproduce the species for the benefit of both sexes. However, she doesn't believe that sex differences should automatically translate into social difference or class hierarchies. Like other modernist thinkers, Firestone believes that humanity should be able to conquer our "nature." Therefore, she believes the sex-class system can be eliminated if we could simply control reproduction scientifically, specifically through means of artificial reproduction. This way, one sex (woman) isn't solely burdened with the task of reproduction for everyone; instead neither sex would be burdened with reproduction and therefore free to participate in the world finally as equals.

Altering the means of reproduction and/or taking reproductive control via cybernetic means or via women's refusal to procreate is not a strategy unique to Firestone, but hers is one of the most notable and influential arguments in U.S. feminist thought. In Firestone's argument, it is easy to see aspects of second wave liberal



feminist beliefs concerning the importance of reproductive rights as well as the ethos of antinatalism that some<sup>63</sup> say is characteristic of second wave, liberal feminism. However, while reproductive control undoubtedly remains an imperative issue for women to this day in our society, we have still not proven that such control would ever lead to equality, or rather, the elimination of the inequities that result from the sexual division of labor. Indeed, there are many possible critiques<sup>64</sup> and limits (as well as some really awesome virtues) to Firestone's solution. However, for the sake of this discussion, what I want to emphasize is the way that Firestone's solution, and other solutions rooted in equality, focus on minimizing or eliminating difference in favor of sameness and equality.

One problem with such arguments is that they hinge on a sense of equality that is rooted in a problematic ideal. As De Beauvoir points out in *The Introduction to The Second Sex*, the standard or norm of personhood we are aiming for is one that is masculine. Rights and privileges gained around a masculine ideal, or any standard of sameness, will always unequally disadvantage certain people (anyone who does not fit the status quo) while privileging others. The creation of any category, ideal or norm automatically excludes those who don't fit the category. And people will always be excluded because we are really not all the same. In fact, it is the creation of static categories rooted in sameness that actually creates problems of difference: if you do not fit the criteria for the category, you are different. Moreover, if you do not fit the

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<sup>63</sup> See Snitow.

<sup>64</sup> Nevermind the fact that, I might not want to give up my reproductive capacity, even temporarily, in the name of equality, and, never mind the fact that there are millions of women in the world (including this country) who despite decades of activism and awesome advances in reproductive science, still do not have enough freedom to be able to decide whether or not they reproduce.

normative or ideal category, then you are not only different but 'less than:' a negative difference. These kinds of differences are hierarchical and also often dichotomous, such as with Man and Woman. In short, seeking solutions under the sameness/equality banner results in the creation (or maintenance) of negative forms of difference.

### **The Problem of Sexual Difference**

It is easy to understand why interventions into issues of sexual difference have sought to eradicate difference by countering it with logics of sameness and equality. However, such approaches are often also based on the assumption that difference is the problem, that difference is bad. The problem with sexual difference is not difference itself; the problem with sexual difference is the *kind* of difference that it produces. Sexual difference is a problem to the extent that it leads to dichotomous, essentialist thinking (and then doing) that creates gender-oriented social hierarchies and inequalities. To be clear, by dichotomous difference I mean difference that is both *a difference of two* and *a difference that is hierarchal*, such as is the case with man and woman. The difference produced via the logic of sexual difference is a negative difference, and one that is really more about identity, about what you are or are not. But is this the only kind of difference there is?

We are not all the same; we as members of a species, as members of a culture, as global citizens are a collection of variations and differences. To the extent that we are not all the same, difference is real. If we are not all the same, adopting any political strategy that would only succeed through equalization is impossible. Thus, we need to consider that the solution to navigating the disagreements and problems imposed by sexual difference, including the problems of mothering and motherhood, are to be found

not by denying difference or creating everyone as the same, but by going through difference and endeavoring to create more differences and variation. This kind of political strategy understands difference as a positive and it looks a lot different than differences constituted via identity. It is *difference as variation, as multiplier, as possibility for change*. Grosz explains:

Without sexual difference, there could be no life as we know it, no living bodies, no terrestrial movement, no differentiation of species, no differentiation of humans from each other into races and classes -only sameness, monosexuality, hermaphroditism, the endless structured (bacterial or microbial) reproduction of the same. Sexual difference is the very machinery, the engine, of living difference, the mechanism of variation, the generator of the new. (*Becoming Undone* 101)

Sexual difference at its root is not a dichotomy, an identity or a sameness of being, but the creation of the new; the root of all possibility for being and becoming.

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If a woman is to be a good woman, thanks to the imperative of essential motherhood, she *must* become a mother. However, to be a good person in this culture, one must be autonomous. Unfortunately, motherhood is not an autonomous form of subjectivity. By definition, a mother is a mother because there is another person—a child—involved in the relationship. Thus, motherhood is a relational subjectivity.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> All forms of subjectivity are relationally constituted (i.e., subjectivity is intersubjectivity), as I have argued in Chapter 2 and will continue to demonstrate throughout this dissertation. However, motherhood happens to be one of the most obvious instances of the relationality of subjectivity, and thus, provides a nice frame for pointing out the limits and contradictions inherent in autonomous conceptualizations of being.

Moreover, because of the intensive and totalizing requirements of contemporary motherhood when a woman becomes a mother, she gives up her autonomy, her liberty, her individuality; she is unable to embody the independent self that modernity has taught us all to strive toward.<sup>66</sup> Thus, women cannot win either way. Forego becoming a mother to fulfill the ideal of autonomous personhood and you are a bad woman; become a mother and you cannot be an autonomous person. As DiQuinzio explains, “Essential motherhood represents mothering and femininity in terms that are at odds with subjectivity as individualism defines it, and so it has the effect of excluding mothers and women from individualist subjectivity” (xii). This situation affects, limits, and constrains the life experiences of women in many ways. For mothers in particular, it might mean feeling torn between one’s relational role as mother and one’s potentiality to be anything other than a mother.

As Kelly’s documentation and my experiences show, mothering can be an experience that is both amazing and frustrating, interesting and contradictory. Likewise, the social structures and discourses that create the (im)possibility and contradictions are made visible in Kelly’s documentation. We can see the processes that structure and reify as ‘natural’ our current reproductive social arrangement that revolves predominately around the sexual division of labor, an arrangement at the root of contemporary social inequality. Nevertheless, as Grosz points out, sexual difference is not, or does not need to be, synonymous with dichotomous and divisive modes for being. Sexual difference when considered differently, as multiple, can be seen as a

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<sup>66</sup> A multitude of feminist scholarship has elaborated the problems that arise when women’s biological capacity to bring forth new life meets with social structures of patriarchy and modern conceptualizations of selfhood as autonomous. The works of Beauvoir (1988), Chandler (2010), DiQuinzio (1999), Maushart (1999) and Thurer (1994) have been particularly influential in this my current project.

potentiality for variations of being: females who do not mother or care for children at all, other mothers, non-nuclear variations of family, multiple care-giver models for childrearing, new ways for conceptualizing subjectivity and producing subjects. As Langsdorf reminds us, "The condition for being an "I" who cares for itself and others (an aesthetic subject) is being a "you" for another; a listening subject. . . . The self comes to be as a "you" in communicative interaction with others, and so the ontologically prior relationship is with a plurality of others" (338).

#### 4. THE INSTITUTION

4. **“The institution, which aims that ensuring that the potential—and all women—shall remain under male control.”<sup>67</sup>**

Motherhood is a social institution that is perpetually (re)constituted via a confluence of cultural ideologies, the most primary of those being patriarchy and neoliberalism. This constitution happens through communication at both macro and micro levels through media and textual discourse as well as mundane interaction in our everyday lives and interpersonal interactions. The purpose of this institution is to regulate the reproduction and care work associated with the rearing of the human species. Reproduction and rearing are activities that require an intense amount of time and labor; the institution of motherhood delegates certain members of society, women, to be responsible for this labor, thus freeing other members up for other kinds of labor, or perhaps just freeing them up in general. The institution of motherhood also operates in conjunction with other cultural institutions whose authorities and experts act to ensure that mothers do what they are supposed to do. This definition of motherhood gets at larger social aspects of motherhood, yet it is still incomplete. Motherhood is not just a personhood and/or an institution.

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<sup>67</sup> See Rich, *Of Woman Born*

## Evaluation: You Are Doing It Wrong



Figure 27: One of the Rosetta Stone-like slate tablets featured *Post-Partum Document: "Documentation VI, Pre-writing Alphabet, Exergue and Diary,"* 1978 (detail). Collection, Art Council of Great Britain.

***“Thus, the mother’s secondary social status is not necessarily a result of the subordination of women by men, but rather it is an effect of the position occupied as the agent of childcare within the legal, moral, medical and pedagogic discourses of the educational institution.” (Mary Kelly, 169)***

*Excerpt from 3909E:*

*October 5, 1977: Kelly has his 4yr. old check-up to-day at the nursery (I felt like I was having a check-up myself). . . . I was so pleased when she said he was the only boy in his class to do all the tests correctly, (I wanted to tell her about his wonderful writing too, but decided it wouldn't be discrete to boast about your own child). Then she said he would be ready to start infants school.*

"Document VI, Prewriting Alphabet, Exergue and Diary" is the final set of Perspex units. It is comprised of fifteen large slate tablets, covered with inscriptions that quickly bring to mind the iconic semiotic cypher of the Rosetta Stone. Like the original Rosetta Stone, each of Kelly's stones contains three different, unique styles of writing. A focal point of this section of documentation is on learning. Important learning happens within the mother-child relationship; mothers are hugely responsible for this learning, but children are often also teachers. Additionally, we can see that the lessons learned—both for mother and child—throughout this period did not all emerge from within the mother-child relationship. Various cultural discourses and institutional authorities contribute to the socialization of both mother and child. We can see in this section particularly how a mother learns what a mother is supposed to do, learns the limit of what a mother is permitted to do, and learns the limits and boundaries of her authority.

The top section of the stones contains letters only, both upper and lower case, some discernable while others are not. They are letters formed by a young child, Kelly Barrie, who is just learning to write. You can tell because the handwriting looks a little shaky as if it were made by hands still developing the motor skills and physical strength necessary to form smooth, easy letters and words. You can also tell by the shapes of the letters that what you are seeing is evidence of a process of learning. As with other



processes of learning, there is repetition of shapes and letters, and a gradual development in the recognizability and correctness of the forms; a sign of progress. There are also other indicators (imperfections) in the shapes that indicate a process of learning. For example, the capital 'E' sometimes contains three arms, but in some instances it is written with four arms. The capital "F" is written with the lower arm being longer than the top arm instead of the correct, reverse way.

The middle sections of the Rosetta Stones contain Mary Kelly's writing. Each of her entries begins with her son's age at the time he wrote the letters in the top section, and then proceeds with her translation of his learning process. For example, an excerpt of the middle section of unit 3909E reads, "E IS FOR ELEPHANT. He's discovering a system of combining what he calls 'a straight one and another straight one.'" Notable, the middle section of writing is hand printed—not written cursive. In this way, the shapes and strokes of Kelly's letters mirror and echo the physical shapes and movements of her son's learning process while simultaneously offering a translation of that process in a language that is accessible and communicable to an outside reader. The middle section containing Kelly's hand printed description and analysis of her son's learning process is a physical demonstration of the way a mother goes through the learning process with a child: both physically and intellectually. She is making the shapes and forms as he does; she is learning as he is learning, though the lessons learned might not be the same for each. Moreover, her print writing is a double movement, not only signifying the joint-learning between mother and child, but also signifying the mother's role in the inscription of the rules of language (and all the cultural rules contained within language) into the psyche of the child. Thus we can see

how the mother-teacher is complicit in the reification, the (re)inscription of the very rules that oppress and subordinate her.

For Kelly, the function of this middle section of writing is multiple. For one, she explains how it places “emphasis on the intersubjective relations between mother and child in the act of reading and writing” (167). In addition to revealing the workings of the intersubjective process, this section for Kelly also demonstrates the “logocentric bias of the system of language...a system that privileges naming and the proper name and that pronounces the beginning of writing with the child’s inscription of his father’s name.” While several feminists, particularly French/post-structuralist feminists<sup>68</sup> have made the claim that language has a masculine bias, this is not exactly what Kelly is claiming. She is juxtaposing the process of learning to write in particular with the cultural ritual of a children bearing their fathers names, showing us the deeply intertwined relationship between the mother-child relationship and learning, and contrasting this process with the idea that—though the mother labors with the child throughout this process, is with him every step of the way—it is the father who is recognized and honored formally through writing as the child learns to write the father’s name. Thus, the process of learning and writing language becomes an index of the patriarchal construction of motherhood. A mother does the work, but the credit, as shown in writing, is given to the father. This is one example of the ways in which patriarchy is embedded and reified through language and our cultural practices. After all, when a child learns to write his first and last name in our culture, he is learning to write his name and his father’s name; the mother and her labor, again, are absent, invisible.

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<sup>68</sup> For example, Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva.

PPDVI illustrates the way in which learning to write means learning cultural rules. Through the exercise and process of learning to write, a child learns what is proper and what is not, what counts and what does not, who has authority and power in a culture and who does not. Moreover, this process of learning, although intimately sacred and connected for mother and child, is not a process that is merely confined to mother and child. Both mother and child learn and reify cultural rules and norms throughout the learning process. Even if they didn't make the rules, they participate in upholding them. We can see how such learning and reification takes place in interaction between mother and child, but we can also see the appearance, reification and (sometimes) resistance of cultural rules and norms in interactions between mothers and other cultural institutions.

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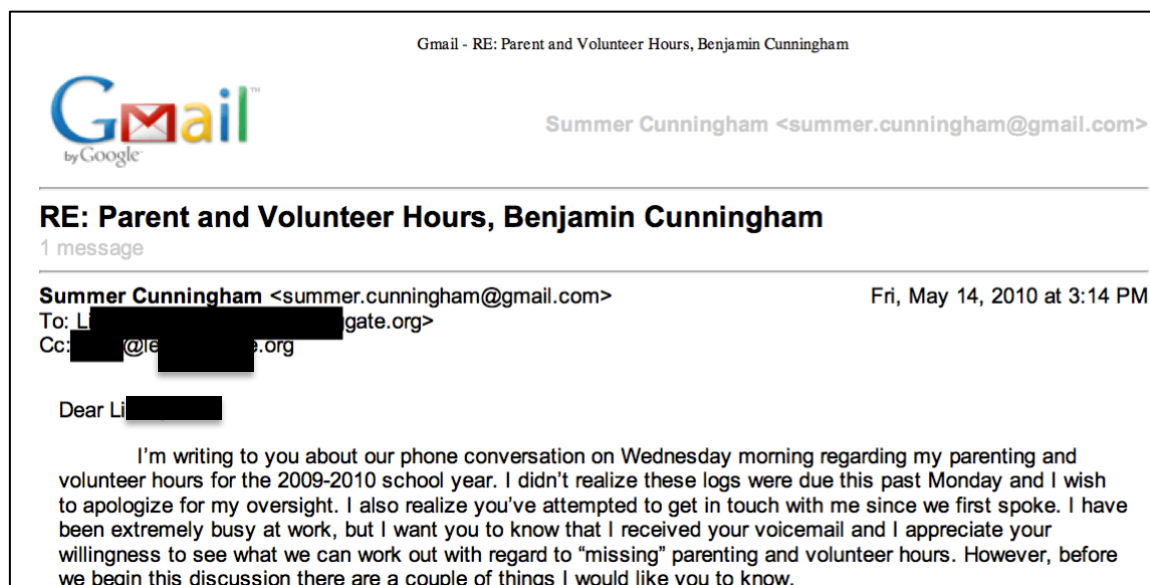


Figure 28: Letter to Benjamin's school about volunteer hours.

*Dear L,*

*I'm writing to you about our phone conversation on Wednesday morning regarding my parenting and volunteer hours for the 2009-2010 school year. I didn't realize these*

logs were due this past Monday and I wish to apologize for my oversight. I also realize you've attempted to get in touch with me since we first spoke. I have been extremely busy at work, but I want you to know that I received your voicemail and I appreciate your willingness to see what we can work out with regard to the "missing" parenting and volunteer hours. However, before we begin this discussion there are a couple of things I would like you to know.

First of all, I chose [name of school omitted] because I feel the school's values as they relate to ecological concerns, community, and pedagogy are in line with my values on these issues. I think parental participation in a child's educational experience not only plays an important role in a child's scholastic success, but also impacts the child's self-esteem and self-confidence. I care about my son and his educational environment, and I want him to know that. I am interested in what he is doing in school. I am interested in what his school is doing. I want to participate and support his educational experience in whatever ways I can. So, when I attend [name of school omitted] events or volunteer my time it is not because I am interested in filling hours on a time log, it is because I care. I participate because I want to be there to support my child. I volunteer because I want to help out and support the school. That said, I understand that [school name omitted] has a per family standard with regard to volunteer and parenting hours because this is the school's way of ensuring parental participation and also a means for building community. This brings me to the second point I want to make, one that I attempted to relate to you when we spoke Wednesday, and a point, which I feel, was invalidated and dismissed.

Every family in your community is not the same. I am single mother and a fulltime graduate student; I work an average of seven days a week. If that sounds unbelievable to you then you should ask Benjamin sometime how much time I spend working. Benjamin and I have no other family members in the state. There aren't grandparents, aunts, uncles who can participate as volunteers at the events that I can't attend, or watch Benjamin while I attend one of your parenting classes, nor is Benjamin's father available to volunteer or attend classes that count toward parenting hours. Moreover, this year, our very first year in the state of Florida, we have had to deal with my father's unexpected life threatening health issues and the bereavement of a beloved family member. Under these circumstances, I have done my best to participate at [school name omitted] over the last year. Please know that there certainly have been events that I would have liked to attend, but it simply was not possible given the unique constraints of my work and/or my family situation. However, I think that you can see that, even alone, I still have contributed significantly to the participation requirements set by the school. Yet when I attempted to express this to you on the phone I was chided "because other single mothers managed to meet their requirements."

I am happy that they were able to meet their hours, but I wonder if they don't also feel the pressure to do dual-duty at school when they are already doing dual-duty in the home. I think that the [school name omitted] community should not only be concerned with the ways in which its parents support the school, but should also be concerned with how the community might support its parents –particularly those who are single

*and trying to do jobs, both in the workplace and at home, that are made for two people. I can tell you one thing, after our conversation I did not feel supported or welcome in the [school name omitted] community. I felt alienated because of my difference, because I can't parent in the same ways as other members in the community, and because I don't have the same resources as others do.*

*Diversity in a community of human beings much like biodiversity in natural ecosystem is an asset that plays a critical role in sustainability. How might [school name omitted] do a better job of recognizing and utilizing the diversity among its community members?*

*There is one last thing I would like you to know. One of my scholarly areas of concentration happens to be in motherhood; single motherhood specifically. I wonder if the reading, research, and community work I have completed in this area over the course of the last year might qualify toward my parental education hours. If scuba diving lessons and blood donation are considered, would you not consider time spent educating oneself and others about motherhood as a form of parental education? Moreover, as this is an area I have some expertise in, maybe we could find some way that my knowledge in this area could be of service to the [school name omitted] community for the upcoming school year? Because I sincerely want to contribute to this community in the best way I can, even though my contributions might not be made in the same ways that some of your other parents contribute.*

*I'm enclosing a copy of my parenting and volunteer hours for this school year. In addition to the entries on these logs, I believe I attended one or two other events that should qualify for parenting hours. Below is a summary of the hours I've contributed:*

### **Parenting Hours**

*New Parent Orientation 8/20 = 1 hr*

*6<sup>th</sup> Grade Mandatory Parenting Meeting 8/31 =1 hr*

*Target Family Reading Night 5/3 = 1hr*

***Total Parenting Hours: 3***

### **Volunteer Hours**

*6<sup>th</sup> Grade USF Field Trip Fall Driver (2hrs per trip):*

*10/7, 10/14, 10/28, 11/4, 11/18 = 10 hrs*

*School Play, ticket sales: 12/8 & 12/9 =2 hrs*

*School Play, program creation: 12/8 = 2 hrs*

*6<sup>th</sup> Grade USF Field Trip Spring Driver: 3/24, 3/31, 4/7, 4/21, 4/28 =10 hrs*

***Total Volunteer Hours: 24***

*I would love to speak to you again once you've had the chance to consider this communication and consider the hours I'm submitting. My schedule next Tuesday is fairly open if you would like to set-up either a phone call or in-person meeting.*

*Sincerely,*

*Summer Cunningham*

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***“the school becomes the site of a struggle for ‘possession’ of the child; it is a struggle the mother always loses and it is the sense of ‘loss’ which produces a specific form of subordination for the woman in her capacity as the mother/housewife” (Kelly 169).***

*Excerpt from 4.515B:*

*Now Kelly is at school all day. /When I told Rosalind that he’d started infant’s school she said “well, you’re a real mother now”*

The final, bottom section of the Rosetta Stone continues to elucidate the themes of learning, rules, and culture; but expands our view one step further, showing how cultural institutions play their role in the constitution and regulation of motherhood. This section of the Rosetta stone contains typewritten diary entries. Similar to the diary entries and journals in other sections of documentation, these entries provide glimpses of Kelly’s day-to-day activities as well as her reflection on those experiences. Whereas the middle section of the Rosetta Stone is revealing of the mother-child relationship, the bottom section of the Rosetta Stone could be said to be revealing of the mother-institution relationship. Arguably, the relationship that the mother has with her child is critical in the development of her identity as a mother; but the relationship a mother has with various social institutions is equally as constitutive of her identity as a mother. It is through these interactions that a mother learns what she is supposed to do. Frequently, what she hears is that she is “doing it wrong.” Mothers are responsible for taking care of

children, but this responsibility does not actually translate into mothers being granted authority or expertise over their children. As maternal scholars Jessica Nathanson and Laura Camille Tuley explain, the overwhelming cultural ethos is that “mothers need to be both corrected and directed, and [. . .] when left to their own devices, mothers will get it wrong” (1). These authors go on to point out the specific character of this direction, stating that “mothers are perceived as needing guidance, and this guidance, historically, has been shaped at the least in part by a political and ideological agenda that would confine women to traditional roles within the family and society” (1); thus again we see that the forces that shape motherhood are patriarchal. In the preface to “Documentation VI,” Kelly makes note of the mother-institution relationship, and the process of discipline and evaluation which occurs through such interactions:

This process of surveillance is epitomized by the yearly check-up, ref. 3.909E . . . [u]navoidably, the child’s symptom is read as a sign of [the mother’s] capacity/incapacity to fulfill the agency of the mother/housewife at the level of the attributes deemed essential to that agency such as common sense, practicality and discipline mediated by an intimate, ‘natural’ bond with the child. (168)

The mere fact that an institution can suggest that a mother is doing something wrong indicates the level (or lack-of) authority that a woman possesses with regard to her performance of motherhood. Moreover, mothers are caught in the paradox of not having enough knowledge or authority to “do it right,” but are paradoxically expected that they should “do it right” because mothering is natural. This process illustrates two important aspects about motherhood. First, it is practically impossible for mothers to do it right. Second, mothers do not have *the* authority to define motherhood for themselves or for

the culture at large. There are other actors who participate, and in fact have more authority, when it comes to defining what motherhood means and is in a given society.

In the earlier excerpt from 4.515B, when Rosalind tells Mary Kelly that ‘she is a real mother now’ we are reminded again that the making of motherhood is a cultural endeavor, as opposed to a private, individual relationship we like to think of when we consider mothers as caregivers of children. Adreinne Rich eloquently elucidates the hiddenness and complexity of the relationships between various social institutions and the motherhood institution in *Of Woman Born*:

When we think of an institution, we can usually see it as embodied in a building: the Vatican, the Pentagon, the Sorbonne, the treasury, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Kremlin, the Supreme Court. What we cannot see, until we become close students of the institution, are the ways in which power is maintained and transformed behind the walls and the beneath the domes, the invisible understandings which guarantee that it shall reside in certain hands but not in others, that information shall be transmitted to this one but not to that one, the hidden collusions and connections with other institutions of which it is supposedly independent. When we think of the institution of motherhood, no symbolic architecture comes to mind, no visible embodiment of authority, power, or a potential or actual violence. Motherhood calls to mind the home, we like to believe that the home is a private place. (274)

It is through the interaction with and evaluation by institutions (especially educational, legal, and medical institutions) and their various authorities—not to mention the ongoing random evaluations by average members of the public in public—



that appropriate performances of mother are crafted and regulated. Likewise, the loss that Mary Kelly or any mother feels when her child goes off to school is not just over the absence of the child. It is also a loss of authority. It is a question of who is in possession of the child. It is a question of who has authority, not just over the child but over the mother. In this way, motherhood is a loss of authority, not merely the authority over a child, but authority over one's own being and doing. I can speak to this, as well, from my own experience (Figure 29).

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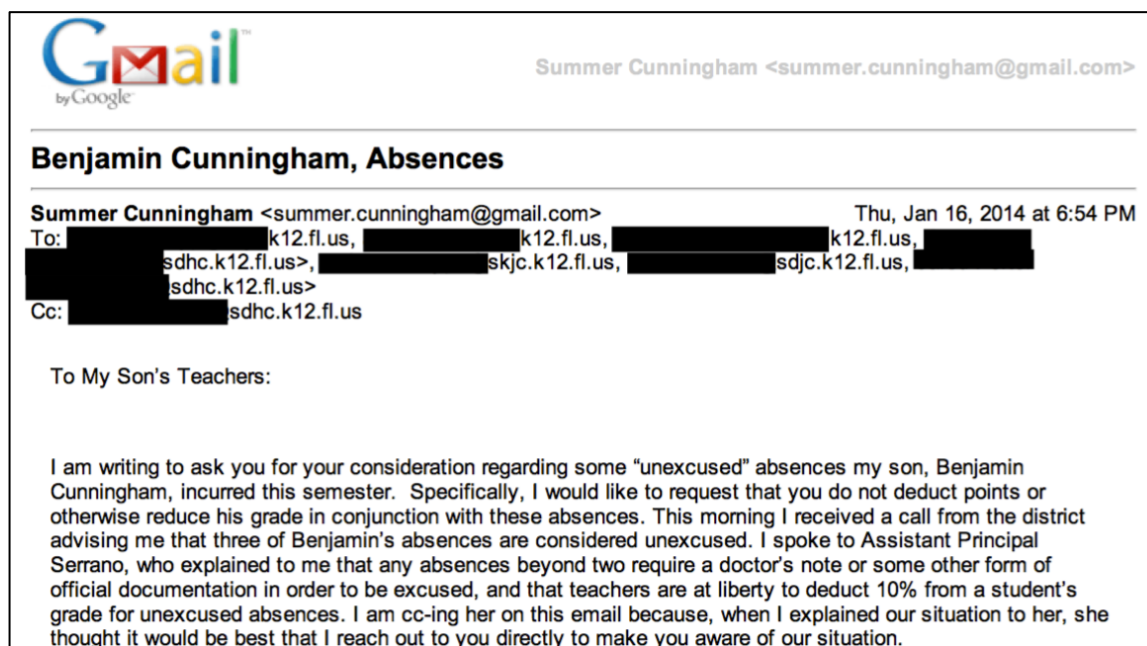


Figure 29: Email to my son's teacher's regarding "unexcused" absences.

*To My Son's Teachers:*

*I am writing to ask you for your consideration regarding some "unexcused" absences my son, Benjamin Cunningham, incurred this semester. Specifically, I would like to request that you do not deduct points or otherwise reduce his grade in conjunction with these absences. This morning I received a call from the district advising me that three of Benjamin's absences are considered unexcused. I spoke to Assistant Principal Serrano, who explained to me that any absences beyond two require a doctor's note or some other form of official documentation in order to be excused, and that teachers are at liberty to deduct 10% from a student's grade for unexcused absences. I am cc-ing her on this email because, when I explained our situation to her, she thought it would be best that I reach out to you directly to make you aware of our situation.*

*on this email because, when I explained our situation to her, she thought it would be best that I reach out to you directly to make you aware of our situation.*

*Benjamin missed school because he was sick. However, Benjamin does not currently have insurance, therefore, I have not been able to take him to the doctor to be treated or to acquire the official documentation required to substantiate his recent absences. Please understand, I am a single mother who is a doctoral student at USF. I cannot afford private insurance for my son, nor can I pay out of pocket for a doctor's visit to get a note to excuse him from school. I adjunct for a living as I am finishing this degree; my income fluctuates depending on how many classes I can pick-up in any given semester. This fluctuation combined with new changes to the FL Medicaid system that were passed in conjunction with AHA means one month I qualified under one system and was disqualified under the other, then that flipped, and to make a long story short, trying to nail down insurance for Benjamin has simply become a bureaucratic nightmare. I have been going back and forth with Florida Healthy Kids and Medicaid for the last three months trying to get his coverage reinstated: both systems have told me that his coverage is being handled by the other system. This is an issue I hope to resolve by the end of this month, though at this point, I feel as though I have very little control over making any of this happen.*

*I understand that [name of school omitted] has this attendance policy as a means of thwarting truancy, but I assure you, that is not what is happening here. If Benjamin is in your class, you already know how much he wants to be in school at [name of school omitted], and I imagine that he is an active participant in most of your classes. And while he is doing well in many of your classes, he is struggling in others. Benjamin is a good kid and he is smart, but he has struggled at times academically. I saw a big improvement in his academic performance when he first entered [name of school omitted]. Right now I feel like he is at a pivotal point; he is doing well in some areas and trying to find the motivation to turn it around in others. I feel like a penalty for these absences might really hurt him academically and also fear that it would cause him to lose the motivation he needs improve his grades in certain classes.*

*Finally, please understand that I am Benjamin's mother, and if he is sick, it is my responsibility to care for him and to see that he gets better. If I believe it is in his best interest to keep him home, I am going to keep him home. Two years ago, Ben ended up in the hospital with pneumonia because I pushed him to attend school when he told me he wasn't feeling well. I do not want to revisit that experience. Not every illness requires a doctor's care, but many of them require rest. This time we were fortunate that he healed with rest. I hope to get the insurance issue resolved ASAP so that he has access to a doctor's care next time if he needs it.*

*Thank you sincerely for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to email me or call me if you have any further questions or concerns.<sup>69</sup>*

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<sup>69</sup> All of Benjamin's teachers responded that they would not penalize him for these "unexcused" absences. In fact, it was only the Assistant Principal of the high school—the person with the highest rank of institutional authority and the person who technically had the official authority

*Sincerely,  
Summer Cunningham*

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The original Rosetta Stone was created in 196 B.C. and discovered in 1799 by members of Napoleon's army. The stone contains inscription in three different languages—Egyptian hieroglyphics, Demotic, and Ancient Greek. The writing essentially says the same thing in each language. Thus, its discovery allowed modern scholars to learn to read hieroglyphics for the first time. Scholars were first able to decipher the Ancient Greek text, featured at the lowest part of the stone. The Ancient Greek was then used to understand the Demotic text in the middle of the stone, and, then, the scholars were subsequently able to use the Demotic text to come to understand the hieroglyphics in the upper section stone. While it is likely the things transcribed on the stone were meaningful or of great importance at the time of its inscription, the significance of the Rosetta Stone in modern time is in its value as a key: it reveals the workings of ancient languages. The Rosetta Stone can only function as key in this way when all three parts are considered as a whole. Similarly, the three sections of the Rosetta Stones in *PPD* function together to reveal certain things about the cultural performance of motherhood. For example, we can see entries made by the child, entries made by the mother, and also observe various aspects of the mother-child relationship such as

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to excuse the absences—who refused to give exception to the particular circumstances of the situation. Several of Benjamin's teachers were horrified to learn of the bureaucratic nightmare that comes with negotiating children's health insurance in the state of Florida. As for me, I lost another morning of time communicating with institutional authorities of the school, time that I could have spent a) communicating with the state healthcare apparatus in an effort to secure Benjamin's insurance and b) writing my dissertation. Nearly one year later and Benjamin still does not have insurance and I still do not have a dissertation. Obviously, this is not the result of this one moment/exchange, but they add up. Maybe the completion of the dissertation will coincide with the securing of insurance for my child—hopefully both events will happen soon.

teaching, learning, and translating. Kelly's stone also reveals the other performers in the production of motherhood such as institutions, discourses, authority figures and experts. Kelly's stones and *PPD as a whole* reveal the contradictions and complexities of the performance of motherhood.

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Medical and K-12 educational institutions represent some of the many who have an interest in the social organization of reproduction and child-care. The analysis and examples in this chapter thus far reveal some of the various other actors involved in creating motherhood. Thus, other actors will also have to be involved in any transformation of current reproductive and caregiving arrangements. Ultimately, a change to motherhood is not something that can be accomplished by the work of individual mothers alone (or even mothers collectively); any call to do so might itself be working from within the frame of neoliberal logic of individualism, a logic that imagines that individuals are powerful enough, on their own, to change their lives. Maushart argues, "The struggle to unmask motherhood is the first step in reconciling reproductive power with social rights and responsibilities—a peculiarly female challenge with repercussions for all humanity" (36), but I caution against employing a politics of unmasking that frames the act as a "particularly female challenge." Yes, mothers might be uniquely positioned to do certain revealings of motherhood and might be the most obvious stakeholders, but a framework for political action that relies solely on the work of mothers can foster disinterest among those who do not mother, and even create the conditions for an exclusionary privilege by which those who do not mother or are not mothers are rhetorically excluded from caring about mother problems. Such a framework excuses others from seeing and understanding that they also have a stake

motherhood. Mothers are already the only ones doing the majority of the work; if mothers remain the only ones doing the work—whether in child rearing or in transformation, nothing will change. Nevertheless, strategizing social transformation around motherhood is tricky, and issues of (dis)interest and disagreement remain at center of feminist approaches to the motherhood problem. I turn now to one final discussion of a particularly problematic source of (dis)interest and disagreement among U.S. feminist approaches to maternity: pronatalism and antinatalism.

### **Antinatalism, Pronatalism: Sources of Disagreement and (Dis)interest**

A critical disagreement among U.S. feminists that has been particularly problematic with regard to how motherhood issues have been approached in our culture is the disagreement between antinatalist and pronatalist orientations to maternal politics. Historically in U.S. feminist thought surrounding issues of maternity, these disagreements have been some of the most prominent and difficult to navigate.<sup>70</sup> I include this discussion because consideration of antinatalist and pronatalist approaches to maternity further elucidates the way that the dominant ideological forces that shape motherhood in contemporary U.S. culture also influence feminist theorizing around the motherhood problem.

Because motherhood is part of the oppression and exploitation of women, it is, and has been for some time, a feminist concern. During the second wave, Marxist and other materialist feminist analyses, from Beauvoir to Firestone, located the sexual division of labor as a key force of women's oppression. Materialist-feminist accounts

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<sup>70</sup> For a couple of different takes on the history of this debate in U.S. feminist from a more chronological perspective, please see Snitow and Hansen.

made several notable and important contributions to feminists thought, but perhaps most pertinent in this discussion are the ways in which such analyses a) pointed to the ways capitalism and patriarchy are served via the present arrangement of motherhood<sup>71</sup> and b) debunked biological determinism, pointing out that even though there are biological differences in reproductive capacities, it is not biology that destines women to a life of reproductive labor, but the way in which society is structured around reproduction. In other words, the ultimate conditions of women's oppression are man-made, not divinely or biologically decreed.<sup>72</sup> Such analyses are important because they help counter notions of biological destiny, moving us toward politics that elucidate how reproductive organization is socially constructed and therefore, theoretically, can be deconstructed or differently constructed. Such analyses do not merely point out that oppression is socially constructed, but point to the oppressive characteristics of the structures and systems that organize reproduction in its current form (capitalism, patriarchy), so that we might move toward the eradication of oppression in ways that are more directed toward these powerful forces in ways that are ultimately more successful and transformative.

Despite the way such analyses pointed to reproduction as a structural problem, solutions posed by materialist-feminists weren't always directed at the structures or

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<sup>71</sup> For example, Hartmann discusses the way that male workers won support of the 'family wage' during the industrial revolution, helping to ensure the separate spheres practice where women take care of the domestic labor, including childcare and rearing, so that the wage-earner is cared for and can focus his energies on work. Despite the number of women in the workforce today, women, especially women who are mothers, are still the ones doing the majority of domestic labor and care-giving for children.

<sup>72</sup> For example, see Firestone's "Dialectic of Sex" or Beauvoir's materialist analysis in *The Second Sex*.

forces that shape motherhood, but at the biology. For example, Firestone's solution was for women to physically stop having babies, and her hope was that this could be achieved through advances in reproductive technologies that would make it possible for humans to be created and grown artificially. Even today, more than 50 years after the publication of *The Dialectic of Sex*, this prospect is not quite technologically possible. But even if it was, it discounts the possibility that a) not every woman would agree to/want to give-up her reproductive capacity in the name of equality, and b) is blind to the reality that not all women have the right to make such choices about their bodies. Nevertheless, antinatalist<sup>73</sup> approaches to dismantling patriarchy became (and remain) a common feminist political strategy for addressing the problem of motherhood. The idea is that in refusing to become mothers, women can refuse to participate in the system that exploits women.

Antinatalist strategies, however, pose problems for feminist politics and for women as well. First of all, there is the potential for divisiveness. In some ways, women who "choose" not to bear children are excused from having to hold an interest in maternal issues, but where do these strategies leave women who become mothers, whether out of choice or circumstances? Are they not true feminists; are they traitors? Can one who is a mother actually consider herself a feminist if she is merely perpetuating patriarchy? And, is refusing to bear or choosing not to bear children really a way out of patriarchy, or just a way out for the women privileged or willing enough to

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<sup>73</sup> Materialist feminists were not solely responsible for the antinatalist ethos so prevalent during the second wave of U.S. feminism. There were several other writers of what Ann Snitow calls "demon texts" –essentially, texts that spoke against the sacredness of motherhood—written during the second wave that helped contribute to this ethos, take for example Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique*. (292).

make such choices?<sup>74</sup> We know better: oppressive discourses and structures do not simply go away because of individual choices; indeed the myth that individual choice is a viable form of politics on its own is responsible for perpetuating the very forces of oppression. Finally, there is no reason to believe that refusing to become a mother will prevent attribution or gender stereotyping by others. If one's sex category (West and Zimmerman 127) appears to be female, one will be subject to the interpolating gaze of *essential motherhood* and viewed and treated by other members of society as a potential baby vessel (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 107).

Pronatalist orientations to mother issues pose just as many, though different, kinds of problems. When I say pronatalist, I do not mean necessarily that the strategy or philosophy is that having babies and becoming mothers is the key to women's empowerment, although there are certainly feminist philosophies that center around maternal power. I wish to refer to any political strategy, position, or theory that formulates motherhood as a sacred and eternal institution, and thus as something both beyond critique and outside the spheres of power. For example, in Wittig's essay "One is Not Born a Woman," she talks about the problem of "woman as wonderful," explaining that "what the concept of 'woman as wonderful' accomplishes is that it retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) which oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories 'man' and 'woman,' which are political categories and not natural givens" (267). Similarly, political strategies that revere motherhood and confer mothers a sacred status, not only fail to "radically question the categories 'man' and 'woman'" as politically categories, but fail to question

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<sup>74</sup> I italicize "choice" in this sentence to refer to the idea that "choice" is a discourse, one that has particularly problematic effects on reproductive politics because it masks the true conditions that impact women's freedom when it comes to reproductive decisions.



the way the category of “mother” is a political category (one connected to “woman”), not a natural given, and is part of the very structure that produces women’s oppression.

Another problem of some pronatalist approaches is that they often center around biological difference between men and women, thus, women are once again reduced and/or enslaved to a biological function and the myth of gender essentialism is perpetuated throughout culture. In the worst case scenario, political strategies rooted in essentialist difference risk patriarchal recuperation, thus women would continue to be oppressed in virtually the same ways they are now, as second-class citizens whose primary function and responsibility is childbirth, child-rearing and other domestic tasks. Irigaray seems to warn against this kind of recuperation when she states that “if their goal is to reverse the existing order—even if that were possible—history would simply repeat itself and return to phallograticism” (329).<sup>75</sup> Assuming that recuperation is resisted, theories and activism rooted in essential difference that emphasize maternal power might also result in (or envision) the transformation from patriarchy to matriarchy. In such situations, the power dynamic shifts, but women’s reproductive capacity is still harnessed for its power, so how empowering is it really? Further, as Wittig points out, matriarchal arrangements still produce a society that is heteronormative/heterosexist and trades one oppressed group for another, which is ethically problematic (327).

Finally, pronatalist approaches also risk the same kind of divisiveness as antinatalist stances. Where do theories of maternal power leave women who do not

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<sup>75</sup> This is part of a larger rhetorical argument, that is focused on created something altogether different than phallograticism, or rather, that sees the only way of doing so is by doing things *differently*. This kind of political strategy is also taken-up in the next chapter when I introduce the MF Campaign.

want children or cannot have children? As DiQuinzio states, feminists have seen that political activism conducted under the sign of mothering can alienate women who are not mothers, women who don't like being mothers, or women who don't want to be identified primarily in terms of their mothering" (DiQuinzio x). Thus, pronatalist strategies can produce disinterest for women who do not identify with or aspire to maternal occupations. And besides, do we want to live in a world where a woman cannot be valued as a person unless she grows babies?

I hope that my discussion thus far in this and previous chapters has illuminated the complexity and challenges feminists face when dealing with the motherhood problem. As I discussed in earlier chapters, there are many other theoretical and practical conundrums interspersed throughout the motherhood problem. For example, is it best to approach motherhood and reproductive rights issues from a liberal feminist position rooted in equality or to acknowledge that women who bear and/or raise children are likely to have legitimately different biological needs than people who do not?<sup>76</sup> It is also important to note that prior chapters have touched, lightly, on the ways that contemporary motherhood is tied to problematic notions of sex and sexuality, and also to how contemporary ideals and practices of motherhood are tied to racism and classism. What I hope this discussion thus far has done is to illuminate some of the contradictions and disagreements that feminists face when approaching issues of motherhood. There is room for expansion in these areas and questions of difference can must remain central in feminist investigations of motherhood. Issues of difference are just as central to questions of maternity as issues of disinterest and disagreement.

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<sup>76</sup> For examples and elaboration on the virtues and limits of seeking "equality" under the law see Williams, 1981.

Perhaps the (im)possibilities for organizing around these issues are illustrated by posing the following questions: How do we critique motherhood without discarding/devaluing the very real work that mothers do with and for children (and society) on a daily basis? On the other hand, how do we value this work without reifying the very structures and discourses that create women's oppression? How do we organize collectively when there are so many different experiences and situations?

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Motherhood, as an institution, intersects with many other social institutions, and is regulated by the discourses, moralities and authorities of those institutions. The examples and ideas presented in this chapter—from the documentation, mine and Kelly's, to the discussion of the feminist disagreements with regard to motherhood—illustrate multiple variations of the values, ideas and related discourses that shape recent<sup>77</sup> and contemporary iterations of motherhood as well as the approaches to the motherhood problem. I close this chapter with some final thoughts on the institution of motherhood by turning to Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*:

The institution of motherhood is not identical with bearing and caring for children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and sexual love. Both create the prescriptions and the conditions in which choices are made or blocked; they are not 'reality' but they have shaped the circumstances of our lives. (Rich 42)

Rich points out that motherhood, the social organization of care-giving for children, is not natural and does not have to be the way it is, could be done differently; there are

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<sup>77</sup> I say recent because *PPD* was a work that began almost 40 years ago, yet we can still see present in Kelly's work some of the forces that shape motherhood in its most contemporary iterations.

other possibilities. However, motherhood maintains its consistent appearance, seems natural and ahistorical, because it is constructed with and reified through dominant cultural values and discourses that are already familiar to cultural members. This is why it is so terribly important to remember that motherhood is not a static but a dynamic construction, one that has changed over time and one that varies from culture to culture and context to context.

The different contexts in which motherhood appears can also change the ways people and institutional actors interact with mothers and motherhood. For example, whereas the previous documents illustrate an interest in surveilling and evaluating motherwork in a way that maintains patriarchal standards of good mothering, business and other organizational institutions that rely on the labor of workers to ensure profits or to ensure that other organizational goals of production are met (i.e., knowledge production) hold different interests in mothering. In academic contexts as with many other professional contexts, there seems to be great interest in keeping motherhood separate from workplace institutions and relegated to the private sphere. Individual actors, particularly those vested with institutional authority and privilege, might have a particular interest in maintaining the current status quo with regard to mothering and privacy and can play an active role reinforcing public and private boundaries. Thus, *interest* in mothering can vary from context to context. Excursus C illustrates another variation of the way that institutional authorities regulate motherhood, creating (im)possibilities for motherwork and for mothers to work.

### EXCURSUS C: MOTHER-FREE SPACE

The analysis and arguments below are telling of the disciplinary (disciplining?) processes of making mother(hood) silent and invisible within the academy, so is the story that surrounds my efforts to voice my arguments and ideas in a public forum. So, I will tell that story first.

The story begins with responses to an essay I wrote about the place of mothers in the academy during a graduate course called the *Politics of Motherhood*. I had been thinking about the issue for quite some time, as it was a part of lived experience as a graduate student. After receiving feedback from the course professor, my academic advisor, and several colleagues, I revised and submitted my essay to the Feminist and Women's Studies Division of the 97<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the National Communication Association (NCA). It was rejected, and the reasons that were given were something along the lines of “although you have an interesting thesis, you are challenging the work of renowned feminists in the field.” I had outed myself in the essay as a graduate student, and apparently I was not allowed to critique the ideas of renowned feminist scholars, and I was especially not allowed to critique their communication. Ironically, the theme of that year’s conference was *voice*, which was also the theme of the paper. The reasons given for the rejection were not connected to the quality of my arguments or of the paper—in fact reviewers commented that it was well-written and cogently argued. The problem with the essay was *whose*

voices/arguments I was contesting. Thus, my voice, the voice of a graduate student mother, was not as valuable—at least in the eyes of this particular reviewer.

After receiving this rejection, I submitted the same essay to the annual conference hosted by the Organization for the Study of Language, Gender and Communication (OSCLG) where it was accepted and later presented. I received some feedback, and made some more revisions. I then submitted that revised paper to *Women's Studies in Communication*, which is the journal that published one of the academic articles that I was critiquing. The editor, Valeria Fabj, rejected it stating that she didn't feel it was developed enough as a stand-alone article and didn't intend to do a "Forum" section of responses to the article I was critiquing. Aside from that, I didn't receive much feedback. Nevertheless, I revised some more and I resubmitted the newest iteration again the following year to NCA's Feminist and Women's Studies Division. This time it was accepted, and I presented it there in 2012. Unfortunately, I didn't really receive any feedback or direction for moving it toward publication, and I am truly not sure if it belongs or would fit in any academic publication although I am quite sure the conversation is still relevant and the issues raised about (in)visibility and silence still ring true.

### **Academia, A Mother-free Space**

When I first set out to write on this topic, I intended to write about “child-free” space, more specifically the workplace as a childfree space. Most specifically, the academic workplace as a childfree space.

“Why do *you* want to write about this topic?” a classmate asked me during a roundtable discussion in my *Politics of Motherhood* class where we each took turns

speaking about our progress with our end-of-term papers. “Well,” I began, not exactly sure how to explain how I’d arrived at my topic, “I guess it’s because I often have my child with me at school, and also because of an article that was recently published by a prominent feminist scholar in my field about parenting and the academy. The article is critical of people bringing their children into the academic workplace. As a single-mother who often has had little choice but to bring my son into academic spaces with me, the article really concerns me.”

What I said was partially true. The full truth was that the article terrified me. It terrified me that a self-identified “staunch” feminist<sup>78</sup> who is also a prominent communication scholar was taking a public stance on motherhood that might potentially make being a (single) mother in academia even more impossible than it already is. It worried me that someone I would hope to consider an ally in the struggle for equity in the workplace seemed to stand opposite me in many ways when it comes to issues of both formal and informal “family-friendly” workplace policy. Most of all, her essay terrified me because it calls into question the very (im)possibility of my future as a mother and scholar in an academic space.

As a second year doctoral student and single mother, I found myself in a liminal, critical and somewhat ambivalent space with regard to my (potential) career in the academe. Like many other academics have noted, one of the appealing aspects of academic work, particularly for parents, is that it is flexible in ways that other kinds of

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<sup>78</sup> See Dow 2009

work aren't. In *some* ways this flexibility is more conducive to caregiving.<sup>79</sup> As Townsley and Broadfoot explain:

Job autonomy and flexibility may facilitate one's ability to fulfill care giving responsibilities outside of work, yet it also generates stress and anxiety about maintaining excellence in scholarship, teaching, and service when the dual demands of work and family are constantly vying for attention. In this sense, short-term flexibility obfuscates the long-term *inflexibility* of academia for faculty committed to both work and family. (135)

Indeed, as I have come to realize, my life as a scholar is much less flexible than I'd hoped it would be. Moreover, the academy as a whole is not exactly "family-friendly" and, with the exception of some departments and individuals, it is certainly not (single) mother-friendly. My personal journey through graduate school as a single-mother has been fraught with financial, temporal, structural, emotional, and material obstacles that are directly related to my status as a single-mother. Often times these obstacles have severely constrained and occasionally impeded my ability to participate in the kind of scholarly engagement that one is expected to partake in as a graduate student. Travel to conferences, attendance at departmental events and late evening graduate classes, teaching, and, most importantly, the production and (hopefully) publication of original scholarly work are all tasks that require an extensive amount of dedication and resources (both with regard to time and money), and, consequently, many graduate students struggle with the demands of graduate school. Couple those demands with the

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<sup>79</sup> For different treatments of how academic "flexibility" can impede and/or benefit care work, please see Dow; Kramer; O'Brien Hallstein and O'Reilly "Framing the Conversation; Sotorin; Townsley and Broadfoot; and Vancour & Sherman.



obligations and responsibilities of single-parenting and the prospect of successfully navigating academe seems grim. In fact, one of the only ways I've been able to negotiate the two competing endeavors (motherhood and graduate school) is to integrate these two aspects of my life, bringing Ben into my academic spaces (classrooms, offices, and even academic conferences), as I discussed on Chapter One. When possible, I have encouraged his involvement as my co-researcher and co-performer.

It was from this space and position, looking at the way things are now in academia (informed both by scholarly literature on the topic and my personal, lived experience) and looking forward toward a future of (im)possibilities, that I first confronted Bonnie Dow's work. It is from this position that I constantly find myself asking, *Is there a place for mothers here?* Ultimately, Dow's article terrified me because it seemed to be just one more item in a long list of evidence indicating that the answer to this question might be *no*. Therefore, my motivation to write about the academy as a "child-free" space was not just an effort to articulate a counterargument to a position that troubled me: I was also motivated by a desire to move from *no* to *yes*, motivated by a personal and professional need to make space for mothers in the academy, which, for me, has also meant finding room for children in the academy.

Unfortunately, as I began to do more digging for research on the topic of "child-free space and organizations," I came to realize that literature on the subject is scant. Though I did find some noteworthy literature on the child-free movement and discourse, both in the form of advocacy and criticism, as well as literature about and by women who were childless either by choice or because of more constrained circumstances, there doesn't seem to be much written about the workplace as a child-

free space.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, both as a result of the reading I have (not) encountered and as a result of some personal reflection and conversations with my peers, I decided not to write a paper about the academy as a child-free space. Instead, I argued that it is more beneficial/utilitarian to understand the ways in which academia is a *mother-free space*.<sup>81</sup> Understanding the way mother(s) both as a term and as a group of women who are primary caregivers to children, are omitted, excluded, limited and/or constrained as a presence in academia is critical to creating an equitable, egalitarian academic culture that values the participation of *all women*, regardless of their maternal status.

It is worth revisiting Dow's article (and a subsequent book chapter that she co-authored with Julia T. Wood) as these essays and the arguments advanced therein were in many ways the catalyst for my thinking and writing on this topic. Moreover, these arguments illuminate the structure of *mother-free* academic space. After summarizing the arguments advanced in those two pieces, I present my critique of the way the arguments are positioned. This critique aims to elucidate the ways in which mothers(s) are absent, invisible, and/or silenced both materially and discursively within academic spaces. Finally, I consider the potential for coalition between mothers and childless academic feminist scholars, a coalition aimed at strengthening the participation and presence of women in the academy, and I will explain how equity will never be achieved

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<sup>80</sup> Child-free workspace/the separation of work and family space is often an issue addressed in child-free literature (e.g., Burkett; and see also, Taylor), and, as I was to eventually discover during my research for this paper, frequently an issue that comes up in much feminist writing about academia and motherhood (e.g., Chandler, Dow, Mills, Riad, and Sotirin). However, while workplace space is often cited as an issue, there isn't much literature that explicitly deals with the question of children in the workplace. Other scholars have noted this gap (see Taylor).

<sup>81</sup> My gratitude to Amy Tinkler who helped me arrive at the term "mother-free space" during the class conversation I recounted earlier about my motivations for writing on this topic.

unless feminist academics make motherhood and mothers an explicit element of conversations about carework and the academy.

### **Colleague-Friendly-Parenting and Informal Parenting Support <sup>82</sup>**

In her 2008 article, “Does It Take a Department to Raise a Child?” Dow laments that in the absence of sufficient “family-friendly” policies at universities, some parents are relying too heavily upon their colleagues, particularly their female colleagues, to fill-in the gaps of unmet parental obligations. She asserts that this reliance often infringes upon other colleagues’ rights, unfairly privileges workers who parent, and often requires accommodation that places the colleagues of academic parents at a disadvantage. Moreover, as Dow explains, “family-friendly environments may make such a scenario more likely because faculty members with children often assume that their family-friendly colleagues will always support their parenting choices, even when those choices come at a cost to those colleagues” (160). Dow follows up this argument by clarifying that by “choice” she is not referring to the decision to have children, but the decisions made after that initial decision such as those choices made as a result of or in response to caregiving responsibilities. In short, Dow argues that academic parents’ reliance on their colleagues for informal support and accommodation often burdens and disadvantages the colleagues who provide such support and accommodation. Interestingly, though Dow begins her essay by stating that academic institutions do not do enough to support working parents and emphasizes that mothers in the academy are disproportionately disadvantaged largely due to this lack of support, she does not direct

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<sup>82</sup> Note: this section, like the arguments/essays it summarizes, is a mother-free space.

her critique toward the departments and institutions that fail to provide working parents with the support they need (which ultimately impacts both parents and nonparents). Instead, Dow directs her solution toward individual parents in the form of a five-item proposal for “colleague-friendly” parenting.

Firstly, she proposes that parents should not bring infants and young children into the office unless there is an absolute emergency. Dow asserts that, “[l]ike it or not, in post-industrial Western cultures, the separation of adult work space and child space is a widely held value, and very few work spaces are set up to accommodate children, particularly infants” (161). If for some reason, such as an emergency, an academic parent does bring a child into the office s/he should not ask someone else in the department—especially a staff member, graduate students, or any person of a subordinate ranking—to watch the child while said parent attends faculty meetings or tends to other work obligations. However, (colleague-friendly item #2) the parent should also **not** bring the child with him or her to department meetings or public lectures, nor should the parent miss the meetings or lectures (item #3) because “their absence makes more work for someone else” (162). Fourth—and related to items one, two, and three—academic couples who work in the same department “should not assume that only one needs to be present for departmental meetings or functions so that the other one can be with the child(ren)” (162). Finally, parents should not assume that they can create work schedules to accommodate their parenting desires and philosophies. More specifically, parents should not “try one of those schedules in which the baby is with one parent on Monday/Wednesday/Friday and the other on Tuesday/Thursday” (163), nor should they expect to receive teaching assignments that work within their child care constraints or their children’s school schedules. Dow sums

up by concluding that “[g]ood colleagues, those with children and those without, think carefully about the way in which their choices affect the lives of those who work with them” (164).

Dow’s initial piece in *Women Studies and Communication* set the foundation for a second piece, co-authored with another renowned feminist and gender studies communication scholar, Julia T. Wood, that builds on some of the themes set forth in her original essay, broadening and developing them significantly. Like the first essay, “The Invisible Politics of ‘Choice’ in the Workplace” (Wood & Dow) asserts that the colleagues of working parents are disadvantaged by parents who request and or expect informal, departmental level accommodation to meet their parenting needs when academic institutions’ (lack of) family-friendly policies fail to meet those needs. Wood and Dow point out that the colleagues of working parents have a significant stake in family-friendly policies and family-friendly departmental culture because, many times, they are the ones “caught in the gaps created by the imperfect fit between parenting preferences and institutional support” (205). The gap they speak of takes the form of an informal parental support system that is also often involuntary and mostly invisible, in which coworkers, who are more likely to be women than men, pick up the slack for parent workers who make inconsiderate parenting choices (such as bringing children to the office) or negligently fail to make appropriate parenting decisions (such as failing to arrange for child care when there was enough advance notice to do so).

The authors present several different scenarios in the form of “snapshots” to illustrate the ways the colleagues of working parents are impacted when parents handle their parental duties (in)appropriately. The authors also use these scenarios to illustrate one of the concerns they have with regard to opening-up a dialogue on this topic. As

they explain, they fear that even bringing up the issue could result in the authors being automatically and unfairly labeled as antifamily or antifeminist. Nevertheless, the authors assert that they and other colleagues of parents have a stake in this issue, are *interested*, and, therefore, deserve a voice in the conversations surrounding family policies. Moreover, they express that even though this is a difficult and uncomfortable issue to address, it cannot be resolved if colleagues who feel disadvantaged or taken advantage of by working parents continue to keep quiet about their discontent.

I agree that opening up a dialogue about how the lack of sufficient work-life policies, particularly those that support and or value the care work that employees provide outside of the organization, impacts *all* employees, not just parents. I can also understand why these scholars would be hesitant to voice their concerns, fearing backlash and/or reprimand from other academic feminists and parent colleagues who, might react defensively to some of the criticisms the authors make in their piece. And for this reason, even though I don't necessarily appreciate the way the authors have constructed and/or framed certain arguments nor do I necessarily agree with their proposed solutions, I appreciate and respect the risk they are taking to open a space for dialogue on this issue. Moreover, I am thankful for this opportunity to address their concerns because it gives me a better understanding of the various perspectives on the issue of parenting in academe, and it creates an opening for others, like me, to have a voice in a conversation that might have a transformative impact on academic culture and policy.

However, before we can imagine transformation, it is important to understand some of the problems with the arguments advanced by Wood and Dow. Several assumptions in their essays help illuminate larger issues and assumptions that impact

the status of *all* women in the academy. The academy is a mother-free space. By “mother-free space,” I suggest that academia demands a freedom *from* mothers, not that academia is a place where those who are mothers enjoy many freedoms and liberties, most especially the freedom *to* mother. Unless, of course, and this is the one caveat, that the we are talking about the kind of organizational mothering roles that might be taken-up by or assigned to female workers and that in some way serve the organizational institution. Although the *organizational mother* and *organizational mothering* may accurately describe some organizational roles (most often performed by women in non-leadership positions), these are metaphorical and do not refer to actual childcare. A mother-free space simply means that the carework associated with raising children is silenced, marginalized, subordinated, and made invisible in the academy. This isn't to say that there aren't women who are mothers in the academy, but that academic culture requires that aspect of a woman's identity to be subordinated to her academic identity. Moreover, while you might find women who are mothers in academic spaces, women who are mothers tend not to appear in large numbers in the highest towers of the academy.<sup>83</sup> In short, mothers' presence here, materially and discursively, are limited and constrained, silenced and made invisible by cultural norms that create academic space as one that is mother-free. Significantly, mother-free spaces are constituted rhetorically and performatively in discourse.

### **Making Difference Invisible through Language: The Discursive Constitution of Mother-free Spaces**

In the introduction to her essay, “Intersections Between Work and Family: When

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<sup>83</sup> Academics from various disciplines address the gender stratification of the Academy; for example see Correll, Benard, and Paik; Curtis; Mason and Goulden; Waldfogel).

a Playpen Can be Office Furniture” which might have alternately been titled, “Things Most Academic Fathers Need Not Worry About,” Mills begins by asking the following questions:

Do you think he’ll continue to work full time now that he’s beginning his family? He sure has become unreliable since they had that baby. He doesn’t seem to be taking his career as seriously as he did before the baby was born. I wonder if he will take the time to pursue tenure as rigorously or seriously now that he has a baby? How will he find time to write as a father? (213)

The point Mills is making via these questions is that mothering and fathering are very different obligations/roles, comprised of different kinds of work, and are roles with different social expectations. As a result of these differences, the professional stakes for academic women who mother are disproportionately higher than the stakes for academic men who father. Generally speaking, women do *more* care work than men. As Tracy points out, “while women have flooded the workplace and educational institutions in the last thirty years, this change has not been paralleled with a compensatory flooding of the domestic sphere by men” (169). Likewise, but more explicitly, Crittenden notes that “[i]n no known human culture have males ever had the primary tasks of rearing small children.”

The use of the generic term *parent*, as invoked by Dow and Wood, does nothing to honor these and other differences in care work, but instead, as several scholars have pointed out, the use of the term *parenting* actually neutralizes the care work differences between mothers and fathers. As Riad explains, when we use the generic word *parent* to refer to primary caregiving we fail to acknowledge the “ideological distinctions in which



each [term] is embedded” (108). Crittenden succinctly points out that “the politically correct term for child-rearing is ‘parenting’—neatly disguises the fact that the mothers are doing most of the work” (609). In this way when Wood and Dow frame their arguments around inconsiderate and entitled *parents*, they are largely obfuscating the fact that female parents do most of the care work that comes with parenting. Even though they claim that their intention is to provide a general critique of all or any parents whose parenting decisions and actions burden colleagues, any critique of parenting behavior is likely to have more of an impact on mothers than fathers.

Moreover, by failing to acknowledge the fact that women who parent do most of the parenting work, Wood and Dow obfuscate the fact that the careers and life-balance of women who mother would be impacted more so than the careers and lives of fathers if there was an absence of informal parenting support networks. Likewise, when Wood and Dow are asking parents to make sure they are behaving collegially by ensuring that they arrange child care for every hour of the day in order to ensure availability for attendance at every department, committee, and faculty meeting; and to make possible their presence to teach classes during the day and often at night; and to also be present for search committee dinners in the evenings; not to mention guest lecture presentations and colloquia which, depending on who is organizing the event, might be offered midday or last thing in the evening, women are the ones who are more likely to be scrambling to make such arrangements.<sup>84</sup> Bear in mind, these same women are

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<sup>84</sup> For a discussion of the ways in which women are typically the ones taxed with making child care arrangements for children in (neo)liberal-type welfare states, see Brabazon.

already more likely to be disproportionately disadvantaged in the academy based on their parental status.<sup>85</sup>

The discursive exclusion of *mother* also has political implications. Language is important, particularly in discussions of “family-friendly” policy and work-life balance, particularly those that are initiated by feminists. Taylor explains:

With the language of ‘parents,’ it can more easily seem that the liabilities of simultaneous wage work and caretaking are a choice; with ‘mothers’ such liabilities are more readily recognized as the systematic marginalization of women. Because women do most unpaid care work, their choice regarding parenting and wage work are differently based and constrained. (59)

In this sense, Wood and Dow’s essays can be seen as an example of communication that diminishes the stakes for *women* when it comes to parenting policies, both formal and informal. Moreover, I use Wood and Dow’s essays to advocate for the discursive inclusion and use of the term *mother* in *any* discussions of parenting in which the term *parent* effectively makes invisible the disproportionate (care) work undertaken by women and the related, unequal professional consequences mothers face in the workplace. I assert that the absence of *mother* in institutional discussions about family policy is dangerously problematic because it ignores the ways in academic processes and policies impact mothers differently.

We need a discursive space for *mothers* in such discussions because not doing so constructs an inaccurate image of *parenting* as a shared, equal endeavor when it is

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<sup>85</sup> See Mason and Goulden “Do Babies Matter?” and “Do Babies Matter (Part II)?” All right, I’ll just tell you: the answer is “Yes and Yes!”

not.<sup>86</sup> The discursive exclusion of *mother* neutralizes, not only the gendered differences in parenting, but other gendered differences about the workplace as well.

A discursive space for *mothers* is imperative in such discussions to avoid an inaccurate image of *parenting* as a shared, equal endeavor when it is not.<sup>87</sup> The discursive exclusion of *mother* neutralizes not only the gendered differences in parenting, but also other gendered differences in the workplace as well.

### **The Material Absence of the Mothers in the Academy: Wages, Ranking and other Issues Stemming from the Separate Spheres Ideology**

*Gaps in pay and rank.* Gender differences in the types of parenting work assumed by mothers and fathers are not the only gender issues that merit mention in discussions about “family-friendly” policies. Not only does research indicate that there is still a significant wage gap between men and women, but there is a significant wage gap between childless women workers and working mothers.<sup>88</sup> In fact the wage-gap between

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<sup>86</sup> In fact, the disproportionate amount of work undertaken by women when it comes to caregiving is actually the issue that Wood addresses in her 1994 book *Who Cares? Women, Care, and Culture*. In this book she advocates for the use of inclusive language (e.g. family leave instead of parental leave) as a means of rhetorically opening up a space for more men to participate in care work. And while, from a communicative perspective that values the constitutive nature of language, it might be tempting to make a similar argument for the use of the seemingly more inclusive term ‘parent’ during discussions about work/life policy, communication scholars should also be able to distinguish the difference between language that creates inclusion and language that functions to make sexist practices invisible.

<sup>87</sup> In fact, the disproportionate amount work undertaken by women when it comes to caregiving is actually the issue that Wood addresses in her 1994 book *Who Cares? Women, Care, and Culture*. In this book she advocates for the use of inclusive language (e.g. family leave instead of parental leave) as a means of rhetorically opening up a space for more men to participate in care work. And while, from a communicative perspective that values the constitutive nature of language, it might be tempting to make a similar argument for the use of the seemingly more inclusive term ‘parent’ during discussions about work/life policy, communication scholars should also be able to distinguish the difference between language that creates inclusion and language that functions to make sexist practices invisible.

<sup>88</sup> See O’Brien Hallstein and O’Reilly, “Framing the Conversation” and Waldfogel

childless women and mothers is larger than the wage-gap between men and women.<sup>89</sup> This latter gap combined with other employment related inequities is referred to as the motherhood penalty—the per-child cost women pay in terms of lost wages for having children.<sup>90</sup>

In academia there is a notable difference between the kind of academic appointments women occupy versus those that men occupy. Most specifically, women who have a child within five years post PhD are significantly less likely than men with children to obtain tenure,<sup>91</sup> and women disproportionately make up the lower ranks of academia and are more likely than men to be found in appointments at smaller institutions such as community colleges and small liberal arts colleges, and they are also more likely to be in non-tenure track positions.<sup>92</sup> In this sense, some places in the academic hierarchy are *freer from* mothers than others.

*Separate Spheres.* Another problematic element of Wood and Dow's arguments is that they are rooted in the assumption that there is value in keeping work-life and family-life separate. As introduced in Chapter 1, the public/private split is rooted in capitalism and perpetuated contemporarily via neoliberal values and discourses. I do not discount the fact that many (most?) workplaces are not designed to accommodate children, nor do I discount the fact that children can distract one from certain kinds of work. However, just because workplaces aren't designed with children in mind, doesn't

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<sup>89</sup> See Correll, Benard, and Paik.

<sup>90</sup> To see the monetary breakdown and further discussion of the costs to working mothers see Budig and Hodges and Correll et al.

<sup>91</sup> See Mason and Goulden.

<sup>92</sup> See Curtis.

mean that they couldn't be, and just because children *can* be distracting doesn't necessarily mean that they always will be or that they would be distracting in every workplace. Nor does it mean, of course, that coworkers and other adults in the workplace are non-distracting. Moreover, just because the separation of work and home-life works for *some*, doesn't mean that it is possible or ideal for everyone to adopt this model of working. Many suggest that a model of integration between home-life and work-life better accommodates work, particularly academic work.<sup>93</sup> While the *separate spheres* work orientation might make sense in white, upper middle-class, traditional households where the husband is free to devote countless hours to work because he has a wife at home who is in charge of the housework and care work, it is questionable as to whether this orientation makes sense for other types of families. What has been made clear in feminist maternal scholarship, however, is that separate spheres ideology is connected to contemporary neoliberal discourses of the *private*, and this discourse advocates and shapes the re-instantiation of traditional, essentialized gender roles and expectations for women and families.<sup>94</sup>

Another problem with the separate spheres orientation to work is that it provides the foundation for other problematic discursive structures such as the *ideal worker*. The *ideal worker* provides a model of work that expects that workers are able to devote significant amounts of time and energy to their work at a quantity one could only devote if s/he had no significant outside responsibilities (or when there is a wife at home handling other responsibilities such as housework and childrearing). While this

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<sup>93</sup> For example see Mills; Riad; and Townsley and Broadfoot.

<sup>94</sup> For example, see Vavrus and O'Reilly.

framework might sometimes advantage men and childless women, it is not necessarily the best model for mothers who work outside the home, nor is it the best ideal model for anyone who believes there are aspects of life that should be more valuable and primary than one's professional occupation. In fact, feminist scholarship has shown that the ideal worker norm creates problems for mothers across various professional and occupational disciplines including and maybe especially academia.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, in this framework, there is a dichotomy between public/private that translates into a dichotomy between the organization/the home. It's important to note that this dichotomy is hierarchal, meaning that one's devotion to organizational work should be placed first. Therefore, anyone, but mothers in particular, who has significant life obligations/work outside the organization is bound to experience conflict. In her book *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What To Do About It*, Joan Williams describes the ways that work practices, including those in academia, shaped via the ideal worker norm create impossible standards for working mothers that effectively "drive mothers out of the workforce of their 'own choice'" (70).<sup>96</sup> Thus, such practices are literally invested in making workplace a mother-free space.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> See O'Brien Hallstein and O'Reilly; Williams.

<sup>96</sup> Indeed, the trend of mothers "choosing" to leave the workplace is so considerable it has been reported on widely in the media. For a fascinating discussion on how news coverage of mom's "opting-out" frames this trend around neoliberal values of choice and the re-instantiation of traditional gender roles, please see Vavrus.

<sup>97</sup> Ann-Marie Slaughter's controversial 2012 article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" published in the *Atlantic* tells a similar story of the trend of women leaving powerful positions political and professional positions. In her article she elucidates a number of cultural practices, both inside and outside of the workplace, that make it nearly impossible for mothers to be successful professionals.

Finally, the *separate spheres* division between public and private is often invoked in discourse to create the boundaries for what is private and what is public. As childrearing was traditionally a kind of work accomplished in the private sphere of the home, it is often articulated as a private responsibility with little acknowledgment of the ways in which social and organizational policies impact caregivers' ability to rear children, and little recognition of the fact that those who do this kind of care work are making contributions to the future of our society, a social structure beyond their own private family.<sup>98</sup> As Vavrus explains, "it is in everyone's best interest to be sure children are raised by responsible, compassionate people—whether or not they are the parents: the economy is dependent on its reproduction and overall productivity on human capital, and children represent its future. The work of mothers is of extraordinary social importance" (54). Unfortunately, recognition of this importance is largely absent in Wood and Dow's arguments. What are present, however, are the neoliberal values of *choice* and connected ideals of the *ideal worker* and *separate spheres*.

### **Making Visible, Making Space**

The previous section illustrates how academia is constructed *communicatively*—through discourse, acts, and words—as a *mother-free space*. My aim in the above discussion was to make visible both the processes at work and to make visible the realities and disparities of life in the academy for mothers. It is problematic for women when *mothers* are left-out of the academy. It is problematic in the case of policy discussions and/or criticisms such as the one launched by Wood and Dow, when *mothers* are omitted or made invisible rhetorically via the use of words like "parent" and

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<sup>98</sup> See Taylor; Tracy.

“family.” Such terms group both mothers and fathers under one category of parent and essentially obfuscate the real material differences in carework undertaken culturally by mothers and fathers, and obfuscate the very different professional consequences that mothers and fathers face when they become parents. It is also problematic when mothers are materially left-out of the academy; such is the case when mothers are less likely to ascend the academic ranks to secure tenure and other forms of higher ranking positions. Indeed, Wood and Dow’s discursive strategies combined with their critique of individual practices instead of a focus on institutional policies, perpetuates an academic culture that silences and makes mothers and motherwork invisible. Although both Dow’s initial essay and the subsequent follow-up piece by Wood and Dow acknowledge that there is a lack institutional support for parenting, their discussion is not thoroughly contextualized in relation to this lack of support, most particularly: it does not do enough to acknowledge the gender differences that unequally disadvantage women both in parenting and in academe.

When feminist academics make arguments related to caregiving responsibility that neutralize difference in parenting roles or advance arguments that unwaveringly uphold ideologies such as *separate spheres* and *the ideal (academic) worker*, they are taking a position that is harmful to women, particularly women who parent, in that it reifies a status quo, that maintains academia as a *mother-free space*. This stance ultimately maintains the very ideologies that impede women’s (not just mothers) likelihood for achieving the same successes in the academy as men. Moreover, in taking a position that reifies such norms, Dow and Wood are able to conveniently ignore a situation in which difference matters, obfuscating the ways in which the current system disproportionately disadvantages some women (mothers) more than others (non-



mothers), and in this way, they fail to acknowledge the ways the current system privileges and provides for the professional academic success of certain women over others.

In this discussion, I have devoted considerable space to elucidating the constitutive function of arguments that render gender disparities invisible. And in this context I believe it is equally important to point out that these rhetorical strategies were employed intentionally and tactfully by well-known and well respected feminist scholars of communication and rhetoric—scholars who understand the stakes for women who mother in academia and who are also, because of their disciplinary backgrounds skilled at making effective arguments and aware of the ethical dilemmas of omission. Thus, the gender-neutral strategy of their argumentation combined with the omission of their particular positionalities as childless women is of note since the authors are not held accountable for the ways that the existing status quo might actually privilege them. Thus, their rhetorical strategy here is another example of the kind of disagreement that arises over the motherhood problem, one that Jacques Rancière takes up in his discussion of disagreement. Disagreements are not merely arguments that present themselves as a polarization of views on an issue; disagreements concern the way an issue is framed, and also, *who*, often as a result of the frame, is permitted to speak on the issue. In Rancière’s terms, disagreement entails an incommensurable meeting of logics: one that acts as “the police” on behalf of the status quo, and another that demands equality. Thus, disagreements are about voice; the ways we conceptualize and talk about problems. In this case, the frame offered perpetuates larger academic and cultural discourses that exclude and obfuscate issues of mothers, motherhood, and

mothering. We will not see equality in academia for women until we make a space for *mothers* here.

### **An Issue for All Women**

As long as we reside in an unapologetically pronatalist and patriarchal culture where the dominant vision of woman maintains that her highest purpose in life is to bear children, *all* women are at risk of discrimination in relation to their (assumed) maternal potentiality. Feminist philosopher Patrice DiQuinzio refers to this social expectation of women as *essential motherhood*. As she explains:

Essential motherhood dictates that all women want to be and should be mothers and clearly implies that women who do not manifest the qualities required by mothering and/or refuse mothering are deviant or deficient as women. Essential motherhood is not only an account of mothering, but also an account of femininity. (xii)

Other maternal scholarship also identifies essential motherhood as a key component of the neoliberal ideology that underpins contemporary motherhood and perpetuates the valorization of traditional gendered roles for women and men.<sup>99</sup> In this sense, the construction and perpetuation of *mother-free* spaces in academia and other organizational institutions holds significance for *all* women, regardless of whether they are or will ever be mothers—they are subject to the standards of essential motherhood regardless of their maternal “choices.” Further, while the ultimate goal for feminists might be to dismantle pronatalist narratives of womanhood, doing so isn’t likely to be accomplished if only childless women are able to realize true positions of equality with

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<sup>99</sup> For example, see Hays; O’Reilly; O’Brien Hallstein and O’Reilly.

men. As much as we need a narrative that grants woman full personhood regardless of her maternal status, we presently need work spaces that grant mothers full organizational participation in light of their maternal circumstances.<sup>100</sup>

There is another reason feminists should be aware of the construction of *mother-free* spaces. As Snitow (2007) and O'Brien Hallstein (2008) have both argued, early, white, middle-class second wave feminists participated in a construction of a feminism that was in some ways constructed as a *mother-free* space, a feminism that not only made invisible and arguably devalued experiences of *mothering*, but eventually resulted in a pronatalist backlash, including the birth of the “family values” rhetoric and its related pronatalist morality which is present in both dominant cultural and feminist discourses. Family values and related pronatalist discourses have serious implications for all women. Feminist politics need to address the *motherhood* issue in a way that is both critical of pronatalism and simultaneously appreciative of the motherwork that goes into caregiving for children—I pick up this conversation in more detail later in this chapter and continue this discussion in chapter 5.

### **Negotiating Disagreements over Workspace**

The social construction and regulation of motherhood impacts *all* women and needs to be addressed by academics and feminists; therefore, it should be recognized as

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<sup>100</sup> I acknowledge that there are both legal and philosophical constraints to creating policies that might be seen as advocating for the special treatment of women. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, this obstacle is largely due to the general lack of emphasis on gender difference in American discourses of equality including the rhetoric employed by second-wave liberal feminist. Thus, how we frame sexual difference matters. However, as many have noted (for example, see Kittlestrom, and Lai) women are disadvantaged in the workplace because of the U.S.'s inability to incorporate policies informed by a philosophy of *different but equal*, and, therefore, this is a topic that needs to be approached. As an alternative, many scholars have suggested creating policies that encourage/incent men to play a greater role in care-giving (Glass, Kittlestrom, Lai, O'Reilly, Tracy) might begin to level-out the playing field in the interim.

critical for academic feminists, particularly in any discussion involving caregiver support policies. It is for this reason that I propose an alliance between academic feminist mothers and non-mothers in an effort to address the concerns raised by Dow and Wood, as well as to address other issues of organizational support as they relate to caregivers and care work. As much as I am distressed by some of the arguments advanced in their essays, I agree that as academics, feminists, and women, they clearly have a stake in issues related to “family-friendly” policies in academic workplaces. Moreover, in looking back on these two essays in comparison to work written by other scholars who engage the topic of mothering in academia, I can see a wide-spread call for dialogue on these issues and can identify initial points of intersection which include, but are not limited to: revisioning work-life policies to encompass and value various kinds of care work; the relationship between neoliberal rhetoric of ‘choice’ and gender inequality; the problems of pronatalism and pro-family discourses, the desire to realize a womanhood that is not synonymous with motherhood or defined in some way by one’s reproductive capacity, the desire for gender equity in care work, the desire for gender equity in pay, the desire for equal opportunity in the workplace, and these are just a few points of intersection.<sup>101</sup> Patty Sotorin nicely articulates those places of common ground as well as thematizes the discussion points that should be included in future conversations on this topic, stating:

the persistence of care/career tensions points to the need to think  
beyond family-friendly policies and programs to the hegemonic

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<sup>101</sup> For further discussion about the tension surrounding “family-friendly” policies along with suggestions for addressing related issues from a feminist and/or gender equitability standpoint please see Aubrey; Glass; Kramer; Lai; Sotorin; McAlister; Taylor; Townsley and Broadfoot; and Tracy.

structures that remain so stubbornly in place: the sociohistorical devaluation of women and the feminine, the dominance of the nuclear family idea; the cultural-political refusal to acknowledge the complications, multiple configurations, and social value of care work, relations, and roles; the romance with and rewarding of a model of academe as a vocation requiring total and unencumbered commitment. (267)

Ultimately, our duty as feminist scholars, both mothers and non-mothers, is to find a way to continue this dialogue and to continue our efforts to create an academic culture that provides for the equal participation of all women regardless of their different backgrounds and life-circumstances so that instead of asking the question, *Is there a place for mothers in academia?* We might start addressing the question, *How do we make a place for mothers in academia?*

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Silencing and (in)visibility are themselves performances, not mere states of existence, and we all in one way or another participate in the construction and reification of the structures and forces that silence and make invisible. Maushart would say mothers are the ones who have to take off the mask, but when mothers attempt to do so and other authorities (such as renowned feminists in your professional field and colleagues and peers who police the content of conference forums and journal pages) succeed at silencing such attempts, it indicates that there is more at work, and more people are at work, in the creation and experience of motherhood than just mothers. The constitution of the institution of motherhood involves and implicates many others who are not mothers. Thus, institutional discourses and members impact the

experience(s) and possibilities for mothers as mothers (and as subjects) in various life contexts, including professional contexts, where women who mother children might also like or need to work and exist. As I have shown particularly in Chapter 4 and Excursus C, representatives from various other social institutions actively participate in the constitution of motherhood. Such participation sometimes includes disciplining mothers to the good mother standard during day-to-day mothering tasks of parenting the child, but other times includes policing the boundaries of professional workplace institutions to ensure the maintenance of the separate spheres ideology. These actions reveal that other members of society do indeed have a stake in motherhood, in the social organization of reproduction and carework—indeed, they have an interest: an interest in maintaining disinterest, an interest in maintaining silence, an interest in maintaining the regulation of mothers and motherhood in both public and private contexts, an interest in perpetuating disagreements about what motherhood and caregiving are, should be, and *could* be about.

## 5. A PERFORMANCE

**5. A collective, cultural performance that produces subjectivities and regulates various forms of social organization such as the (sexual) division of labor and social relations such as family/kinship; a performance that produces both limits and possibilities for who and how we might be and become**

### Performing Motherhood: (M)other Performers

*Motherhood—the way we perform mothering—is culturally derived. Each society has its own mythology, complete with rituals, beliefs, expectations, norms, and symbols.*

--Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood*

Who performs motherhood? Well the most obvious answer is, mothers. This is an incomplete answer to the question, of course, but I will come back to that later. First, I want to address the idea of performing mother. Performances are doings that are evaluated. We perform at our jobs, and we receive performance evaluations; likewise, our everyday performances, particularly our gendered performances, are also evaluated (or surveilled) constantly.<sup>102</sup> Social roles and identities are performative accomplishments, negotiated in everyday interaction with other actors against a backdrop of taken-for-granted normative discourses to which we hold one another accountable for 'correct' and 'incorrect' performances of self.

If we say someone is a mother we know something about what *she* does and something about what she is *supposed to* do. I emphasize the words *she* and *supposed to* because performances of mother are gendered performances that come with a specific set of cultural expectations. The primary expectation of mother being one of gender—only women are permitted to be mothers, and, mothers are assumed to be women. As West and Zimmerman explain, “In virtually any situation, one’s sex category can be relevant, and one’s performance as an incumbent of that category (i.e., gender) can be subject to evaluation” (145). Interestingly, in the case of *mother* performances, the sex category really isn’t up for evaluation because in our culture *mother*—defined as a

<sup>102</sup> See Frye; West and Zimmerman.



woman who bears and/or assumes the role of primary caregiver for a child—already assumes a particular gender, woman. So, when mothers are performing the duties of mothering (such as caregiving, nurturing, educating, etc.), they are also performing, constituting and reifying certain social beliefs about gender (and sex and sexuality) including the belief in discrete biological sex categories. As West and Zimmerman explain, “if we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category” (146). In other words, based on our cultural definition of mother, the performance of mother is “a sex-announcing behavior” (Frye 32). Therefore, to perform mother is to perform gender.

It is also important to remember that mothers are not the only ones who perform motherhood: motherhood is a cultural production. As Thurer writes above, motherhood is “the way *we* perform mothering.” My added emphasis is meant to highlight the taken-for-granted *collaborative* aspect of motherhood as performance. Certainly mothers have a very special role in the production of motherhood, but *everyone and anyone* in our culture can and ultimately does play a role in the performance of motherhood. Anytime a mother is evaluated for her performance, either publicly in the media or more privately in one-on-one/face-to-face interactions, the person/people issuing the evaluations are also (re)producing the cultural values and norms of motherhood. As with other gendered performances, it is not a case of anything goes. Performances of mother are constantly surveilled for appropriateness in society by all members of society including mothers themselves. Motherhood is a social accomplishment, a product of discourses, and these performances are enacted at various levels of communicative

interaction. We collectively participate in the production, but it is also important to remember that we are all in some way products of the production.

### **Motherhood Performs**

Motherhood is a discursively and performatively constituted construct that also performs a regulatory social function by making possible certain ways of knowing and being in the world. For example, it creates mother as a subject position and makes (im)possible certain subjectivities. The production of this particular role does more than to merely create an identity for individuals who raise children. Mother reifies particular gendered expectations of child-rearing, most particularly with regard to who in our society can and should be a mother (women) and who can and should not (men, children, and perhaps lesbian women).

Beyond the production of certain kinds of subjectivities, *motherhood* also plays an important role in producing and regulating sex, sexuality, relationships, reproduction, and family formations. In other words, *motherhood* performs an influential organizing role in contemporary society. For example, contemporary iterations of *motherhood* tend to privilege certain relationships and family structures (heterosexual coupling and the nuclear family) over others (homosexual coupling, single-mother-headed households, and other 'non-normative' family formations) by helping to position certain relationships as *normal* or *natural* and others as deviant or abnormal. In short, motherhood makes only *certain* kinds of social organization possible, while making other options more difficult to realize.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> For a more detailed discussion about the performative constitution of kinship in contemporary culture, please see Bell's "Esperando al Puerto."

### The Performance of PPD

So, how do we talk about an issue, a problem, like motherhood, in a way that is critical but that simultaneously exposes the real work involved in this role and honors the intricacies of the mother-child relationship? *Post-Partum Document* offers one example of how such work can be accomplished, performatively. Further, its ability to engender interest and navigate disagreement makes *PPD* a particularly interesting study for contemplating alternative interrogations of motherhood.

Maushart defines the mask of motherhood as “an assemblage of fronts—mostly brave, serene, and all-knowing—that we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experiences” (2) that helps ensure that “the realities of . . . motherhood are kept carefully shrouded in silence, disinformation, and outright lies” (5). Thus, Maushart sees the mask as prop that enables a particular performance of motherhood, what she calls a “faking” of motherhood.<sup>104</sup> Maushart’s call to unmask motherhood, then, is a call to expose the “realities” and can be traced back to a passage in Adrienne Rich’s preeminent and foundational text on motherhood, *Of Woman Born*, where Rich states,

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<sup>104</sup> Performances studies scholars have been critical about conceptualizing performances as mere “fakings” because doing so creates a frame for performance that obfuscates its constitutive powers and effects in real, everyday life. The “faking” frame is usually credited to Erving Goffman’s pioneering dramaturgical work in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner’s work on cultural rituals demonstrated the productive capacities of collective cultural performances, thus shifting the frame from performances as fakings to performances as makings. Later, communication studies scholar Dwight Conquergood argued for the political importance of understanding performances power for (re)making and breaking—see Conquergood’s “Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics” for detailed discussion. As such, contemporary performance theory and scholarships tends to view performances, particularly cultural performances, as events and interactions that can potentially fake, (re)make, and break contemporary cultural norms. However, although Maushart’s concept of “masking” motherhood does appear to be rooted in a faking frame, her call to unmask motherhood can be understood in terms of “breaking” with normative cultural performances of motherhood. Further, it is clear in work that she conceives our mother performances as having real life effects, particularly in the lives of women.

“The words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through” (24-25). In this part of her text, Rich is speaking specifically about the act of women publicly and openly sharing the not-so-endearing aspects of their experiences as mothers. Making (women’s issues) visible and speaking from the places of silence has long since been an important aim of feminist projects, particularly projects connected to mothering and motherhood, and *Post-Partum Document* contributes to this ongoing endeavor. Like Maushart, I also believe that motherhood is a performance; but it is not merely “a faking” by individual members (mothers) of the culture, but rather a collective and consequential cultural performance<sup>105</sup>; the way we perform motherhood together has the potential to reify or challenge existing norms surrounding kinship, sexuality and gender. Thus, one of the most interesting aspects of *PPD*, is that it is not merely an unmasking of the experiences of motherhood, as Maushart has called for, but rather, *Post-Partum Document* is an unmasking of the performance of motherhood itself. This is an important difference.

*PPD* goes a step beyond unmasking in Maushart’s sense; Kelly uses multiple layers, mediums and variations of documentation to reveal the complexities of motherhood as experience and institution. Indeed, she shows us the (literally) shitty aspects of motherwork while also revealing and struggling with other forces that shape motherhood and a mother’s experiences. Some of these forces include patriarchy, capitalism, scientific and academic discourses, experts and other authority figures, other

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<sup>105</sup> The term “cultural performance” was developed by and is credited to anthropologist Milton Singer (1972). For Singer cultural performances consist of observable events that are bound by discrete time frames, e.g., rituals and ceremonies. I am not invoking his term or definition here as I am interested in the ongoing performance of motherhood as a cultural production; I am particularly interested in the everyday and mundane performances and what gets constituted, reified, and contested in such interaction.

institutions—such as educational institutions, contemporary discourses of the good mother, and love. In other words, we see from Kelly’s project the ways in which both mothers and motherhood are created collectively through the interaction of multiple actors who enact normative and non-normative cultural discourses. Through Kelly’s personal journals, we get a sense of how aspects of the institution become internalized in a mother’s experience: we see and perhaps begin to understand the responsibility, guilt, and sometimes even resentment that is produced when single individuals are taxed with doing the majority of the childrearing work and when dominant values/discourse are internalized. Moreover, the consistent incorporation of Kelly’s son’s products and creations offer a constant reminder of the intimately intersubjective experience of the mother-child relationship and the constant presence of the child. Contradictions of the experience of motherhood are revealed, and it becomes possible to see how one can simultaneously love a child and even love the identity that motherhood produces while also feeling resentment toward the inequity in responsibilities placed on mothers and the loss of one’s autonomy. PPD elucidates the various actors, roles and relationships at play in the performance of motherhood all whilst performing a critique of the motherhood institution and honoring the lived experience of mothering.

*Post-Partum Document*, as an artwork and a text, can also be understood as *interesting* performance of motherhood. Here, when I say “interesting” I mean it gets attention (garners interest), and also that it reveals the various interests (whose interests) at play in the cultural (re)production of motherhood. One of the ways that Kelly accomplishes this interesting performance is by offering an unexpected performance of motherhood. For example, DI first gets our attention by offering a shocking yet truthful, honest yet unexpected image of the mother-child relationship:

twenty-eight poop-stained dirty nappy liners. This unexpected representation of the mother-child relationship at once points out our taken-for-granted assumptions about the mother-child relationship and forces us to suspend them as we try to make sense of the meaning behind the unexpected display of dirty nappies. We as the viewer have to ask, what am I looking at? What is happening here? *PPD* makes the familiar strange, but not completely foreign. We recognize the nappies, but have to think about why they are being displayed as a representation of the mother-child relationship. When our expectations are broken and challenged in this way, we are forced to think and engage the work from a place of discomfort/confusion, and *we have to think differently* if we are to understand.

Another interesting theme/technique incorporated throughout *PPD* is the play around visibility/invisibility. In many ways, *PPD* can be understood as a project that aims to make the unseen visible: it shows us the dirty work of motherhood; she reveals aspects of the motherhood experience that are expected to be secrets: the insecurity, guilt, and ambivalence she feels as a mother. *PPD* is able to reveal the unseen by making absent the anticipated images of the mother-child relationship. It is only once those are out of the way, that we are able to see a more nuanced and complex picture of motherhood.

A final and unique take-away from the performance of *Post-Partum Document* is connected to its mode/method of communication. *PPD* offers a layered, non-traditional account of mothering displayed across different communication media and includes personal journals, heady theoretical analysis and commentary grounded in psycho-analytic theory to products, and miscellaneous artifacts of the mother-child relationship.

It is through the juxtaposition of these different media and through the variations of

voice and theme that *PPD* produces a performance that any singular ingredient would not, on its own, accomplish. The composition at once gets to unsayable aspects of the mother-child relationship and produces ideas and excesses beyond the materiality of the artwork itself. In a similar way, though without reprising or “covering” Kelly’s pieces, I try in this dissertation to create a document with variations on theme and voice, juxtaposing writing and ideas that might not normally be presented beside one another, to see what the performance of these juxtapositions might yield.

Nevertheless, *PPD* is not without limits in what it accomplishes as a critique and performance of motherhood. *PPD* is not a universal picture of motherhood. It is resolutely situated as the experience of an educated, white woman who was acting from within a rather traditional, heterosexual relationship. Her experience, this piece of work, is telling of many of the cultural conventions of motherhood, but it is also important to bear in mind that she is speaking from an intersection of various social privileges—(education, marital status, hetero/sexuality, race, class); indeed, she is able to tell and do this work because of that privilege. And while her work and experience has and still might resonate with many, it does not represent all or even the majority of experiences of women who mother in contemporary U.S. culture. Additionally, despite its renowned status and legacy in feminist and art circles, *PPD* is relatively unknown outside of academic settings; in this way, it is somewhat exclusive. And while its medium of communication is part of what makes it so effective (the multi-media, actually), these qualities are also what make it somewhat inaccessible. Herein, I have offered a translation of this artwork, as I understand it. I have spent many hours thinking about it, looking at it, rethinking with it, and I have spent many more hours thinking about how to best talk about it with others; how to translate it. This is, of course, what the

performance of academic interpretation is all about. Sometimes translations are an important part of the communicative process: they can help garner interest and help works reach a wider audience, and that is worth taking into consideration. However, there is also much to be said about accessibility and communicability: What would you really think if you saw the shit without my guidance and commentary? Would you be compelled to spend as much time with it?

Finally, while *PPD* may garner an initial level of interest upon first glance, it is unclear to me that it garners other, deeper kinds of interest. Does it compel people to *feel* their stake in issues of caring and caregiving, particularly people who aren't mothers? Does it garner participation or make room for voices beyond the author's own?

### **The Motherhood Problem is Everyone's Problem: Revisiting Disagreement and (Dis)interest**

To recap thus far, the motherhood problem refers both to problems faced by women who mother (most especially exploitation and oppression) and also to the disagreements that feminists face in theorizing and strategizing around issues of reproduction and motherhood. A final component of the motherhood problem is one connected to that of (dis)interest: motherhood provides a discursive frame that is exclusionary.

Unlike other forms of exclusion where those who are "left out" might suffer social marginalization or some kind of inequity, the discursive exclusion created by motherhood is one of exclusionary privilege, meaning that people who do not mother or are not mothers are excused from concerning themselves with mother problems. Mother



problems are seen as belonging only to a certain group of people, mothers. Thus, it is up to the oppressed to solve their problems while those who are not mothers are free to ignore the issues and to pretend that they do not have a stake in them. Therefore, in many cases, those in positions of power or with enough social privilege to actually help make meaningful changes to systems, discourses, structures, etcetera, are not positioned as part of the conversation. Further, as this dissertation has demonstrated, particularly in Chapter 2 and Excursus C, disagreement and disinterest are connected. From Rancière's perspective, political disagreements are always about *what* is in question and *who* is permitted to participate in the conversation. Thus, when we see indications of (dis)interest concerning the motherhood problem, it is often coming from those who might have an interest in maintaining that (dis)interest as a means of maintaining the status quo. Lyotard states that, "Perhaps misers are the only ones whom nothing interests, since they fear all possibilities" (Lyotard 53). Likewise, anyone actively working to maintain (dis)interest might be doing so because they also fear alternative possibilities, including "the possibility of loss [which] is always included in [interests] investment" (Lyotard 54).

The motherhood problem is a big problem, and mothers and women are certainly not the only ones who have a stake in issues connected to motherhood and reproduction. Issues of motherhood and reproduction are ultimately connected to capitalism, human rights and freedom, equality, globalization, modes of (re)production, heteronormativity and heterosexism, sustainability, and more. What is needed *at this time* is political strategy that at once elucidates these connections, thus addressing issues of disinterest, including exclusionary privilege, as described above, while also responding to the challenges of disagreement that are also prevalent across

conversations around motherhood. What we need is what I call a motherf\*cker campaign.

The MotherF\*cker Campaign is a conceptual idea for addressing the motherhood problem; a vision of something that could be; another experiment in visibility and voice. The manifesto below provides insight into the ideas behind the campaign as well as its aims. I then follow-up with a discussion of the campaign in terms of its (im)possibility.

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### **MotherF\*cker**

**1** a person, institution, policy, or discourse that interferes with a mother's ability to act in her best capacity as caregiver of a child or children **2** a person who exploits or otherwise harms, with word or actions, a mother or mothers **3** a person who dismantles motherhood, who says "fuck you!" to the motherhood institution **4** a person who works toward new possibilities of caring; of being with and for one another

*See also: **motherf\*cking***

### **MotherF\*cking**

**1** interfering with a mother's ability to act in her best capacity as caregiver of a child or children **2** the exploitation or harm, with words or actions, of women who mother **3** consciousness raising and critique of the institution of motherhood **4** imagining and enacting new forms of caregiving arrangements for children and people

*See also: **motherf\*cker***

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### **A MotherF\*cking Manifesto**

The MotherF\*cker Campaign as a political strategy is an attempt to resolve motherhood problem(s) in a way that is new, innovative and timely. The decision to use the word “fuck” is not cavalier, but intentional.<sup>106</sup> First, I use it to be provocative, to get people’s attention. The only people likely to pay attention to a campaign called “Mothers Matter” or even “Against Motherhood” are mothers and/or feminists, but the title “The MotherF\*cker Campaign” will hopefully grab the attention of others. Second, I realize that the word “fuck” bears a somewhat violent connotation, but I contend that the way mothers are treated and oppressed, that motherhood itself is violent.<sup>107</sup> Third, “fuck” also connotes a sexual act. In this way, I want to point to the fact that, even though mothers are most frequently depicted as sexless or asexual, motherhood is all about the regulation of sex and sexuality. This campaign does not forget that. Fourth, “fuck” is profanity. In his essay “In Praise of Profanation,” Giorgio Agamben discusses the virtues of profanity, defined as the act of removing something that has been reserved for sacred use only and returning it to the realm of common use. Motherhood has not just made the act of women bearing and rearing children sacred but has done so in a way that the enslavement of women to this work has also become sacred. Motherhood as a sacred institution not only upholds the oppression of one group of people, but makes

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<sup>106</sup> To this extent I align myself with feminist writers such as Wittig, Irigaray, and de Lauretis who show and/or tell us about the importance of rhetorical strategy. I am not sure, however, if de Lauretis would approve of this particular rhetorical strategy because of its reference to violence.

<sup>107</sup> In “The Rhetoric of Violence” de Lauretis argues that “violence is en-gendered in representation” (266). My aim here is not to reify this kind of violence, but to knowingly employ a rhetorical strategy that connotes/represents/nods towards the ways in which violence is committed against women, rhetorically and materially, as part of the process of socially organizing reproduction.

possible certain kinds of relations between people while foreclosing other kinds of relationships. Motherhood must be profaned if we are to realize better ways of caring and being for one another in the world. Below, I offer a more specific outline of the MotherF\*cker Campaign (hence forth, MF Campaign).

### **What is a motherf\*cker? Who is doing the f\*cking and who is getting f\*cked?**

The most important thing to understand about the MF Campaign is that it addresses two kinds of mother(s), *Group A* and *Thing B*, and has two primary initiatives, one centered on each kind of mother.

*Group A* is comprised of the individuals in society, most often women, who bear and/or assume the majority of child-rearing work. The first initiative of the MF Campaign focuses on making life better for *Group A* mothers. This aspect of the campaign would involve consciousness-raising activities that aim to identify and expose motherf\*ckers: people, institutions, policies, rhetoric, and/or discourses that “screw-over” those who mother, thus, drawing attention to the kind of work (and exploitation) involved in mothering. In short, it raises and answers the questions: *What is a motherf\*cker? Who is doing the f\*cking and who is getting f\*cked?* Another aspect of this first initiative would involve organizing and promoting events, activities, and the formation of networks—both formal and informal—and organizations specifically aimed at supporting and/or providing resources to those engaged in motherwork.

The second initiative, *Thing B*, refers to “mother” as a concept and institution: the idealized, essentialized, white, able-bodied, middle-class, image of the “good” mother; the idea that motherhood is the ultimate aspiration for all women. The ultimate aim of this aspect of the second initiative is the deconstruction of the category

of mother. To this extent, this campaign is in line with thinkers such as Butler and Wittig, who call for the undoing of the category of Woman. Wittig, for example, calls for the dissolution of Woman via the birth of lesbianism, explaining, “women belong to men. Thus a lesbian *has to* be something else, a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is not nature in society” (267). Thus, for Wittig lesbianism is a strategy for a way out of Woman by actually imagining and doing things differently. But as women belong to men, so do mothers belong to patriarchy; there is no way out of Woman or sex/ gender categories as we know them until we figure out a way out of motherhood. This does not mean merely that we refuse to become mothers by “choosing” not to bear or raise children. In the same way Wittig was moving us toward something other than Woman, the MF Campaign is moving us toward something other than mother. The only way out of motherhood is through *both* the deconstruction of motherhood *and* the simultaneous construction of new possibilities. Thus, in the second initiative of this campaign, when the earlier questions are raised again—*What is a motherf\*cker? Who is doing the f\*cking and what<sup>108</sup> is getting f\*cked*—the answers change. A motherf\*cker is someone, perhaps a mother but anyone really, who dismantles motherhood, who says “fuck you!” to the motherhood institution. Indeed, mothers are not the only agents and motherhood isn’t the only thing *getting f\*cked*: heteronormativity, “family values”, problematic standards of womanhood, among other issues are also addressed and reworked in this campaign.

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<sup>108</sup> The earlier iteration of this question in the description of the first initiative of the campaign asked the question “*who* is getting fucked.” However, the second initiative of this campaign is doing something different with these questions. Nevertheless, it is not the aim of this campaign to advocate that anyone actually be harmed, therefore, the rephrasing of this question to “*what* is getting fucked” seems more inline with the second initiative as the MF Campaign is interested in doing away with patriarchal motherhood.

As with the first initiative of the campaign, the second initiative of the campaign would also involve consciousness-raising, but this time the focus is on critiquing motherhood as an institution. Questions raised include: *Who does the majority of caregiving work and how does this work impact their lives? Who is (dis)advantaged by dominant caregiving arrangements such as motherhood? And also, What other kinds of caregiving arrangements and relationships might we imagine?* These questions are raised, not just theoretically, but via various forms of action and doing. Some actions might occur through formal, legal channels such as movements that seek to extend marriage rights to same-sex couples, thus expanding/queering a patriarchal institution connected to the oppression of women and mothers. Another example might include creating new forms of contract law that allow people to enter into various forms of legal contracts around caregiving,<sup>109</sup> thus extending rights and privileges typically associated with heterosexual marriage and nuclear families, to those participating in unconventional family formations, or caring for loved ones other than spouses or biological children. Other times, more subversive strategies might be called for, strategies that disrupt<sup>110</sup> the taken-for-granted, gendered assumptions of motherhood, such as the idea that all mothers are part of a heterosexual, nuclear family unit where the mother is able to stay at home to do domestic work because the family is supported by the father-breadwinner. For example, a single mother might choose to send in

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<sup>109</sup> For elaborate discussion of such possibilities see Epstein, and also see Bell's discussion on "Shifting Kinwork" in "Esperando al Puerto, particularly her arguments about attending "to historical, material, and social constructions of gender becomings in and through the law" (14).

<sup>110</sup> Crawley et al. discuss the resistive value of "*everyday disruptions*—intentional practices on a day-to-day basis to attempt to change gendered messages or show the gender box structure to be false" (204). I contend such practice can extend to everyday performances of mothering.

friends and colleagues who identify themselves as the child's "other-mother", regardless of their gender, to pick-up her child from school when she cannot because she is working,<sup>111</sup> or to help her fulfill the family volunteer hours that are now common mandates for enrollment at many schools. In sum, this part of the campaign is a call for a critique of motherhood, either through direct speech or via (de)constructive acts that queer motherhood and mothering. It can be seen as a call to become motherf\*ckers, not in the sense of doing harm to women who care for children, but in the sense of taking down an institution that oppresses those women. The ultimate goal is to discover caregiving arrangements outside of and beyond motherhood and to discover places of being for women beyond motherhood.

The instigation for the campaign is a curious statement: Motherhood is impossible. At least it feels that way for those of us who do it on a regular basis, and poses hardships on the lives of individuals in this society. On a broader scale, beyond the individual, motherhood continues to perform a powerful and problematic regulatory force in contemporary culture. For this reason, motherhood has been a central point of focus for U.S. feminists for decades. Antinatalist approaches such as refusing to become mothers and pronatalist strategies that center on maternal power and biological essentialism offer unrealistic or limited possibilities for transformation. Countering and transforming the performance of motherhood will require political strategies that are thoughtful, creative, and strategic, and will also require the participation and investment of those other than mothers. The MF Campaign proposes a means for raising consciousness about and addressing the motherhood problem in a way that is

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<sup>111</sup> This was a strategy I employed at my son's school many times, out of necessity, and to disrupt people's assumptions about heteronormativity and gendered assumptions about caregiving and motherhood.

strategic, participative, and novel. At first glance, the MF Campaign appears contradictory, impossible—organizing around mothers and supporting them all the while seeking to deconstruct and dissolve the construct of mother. Nevertheless, we have to entertain this double-politics in order to be successful, to escape constructed differences while accounting for the differences that matter, and to generate participation on a wider scale. We have to perform, not just identities and subjectivities differently, but imagine and perform our relationships differently. We have to produce new possibilities from this place of impossibility. We can do it. Mothers do it everyday.

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### Mom's School by Ben: A Translation by Summer (Ben's Mom)

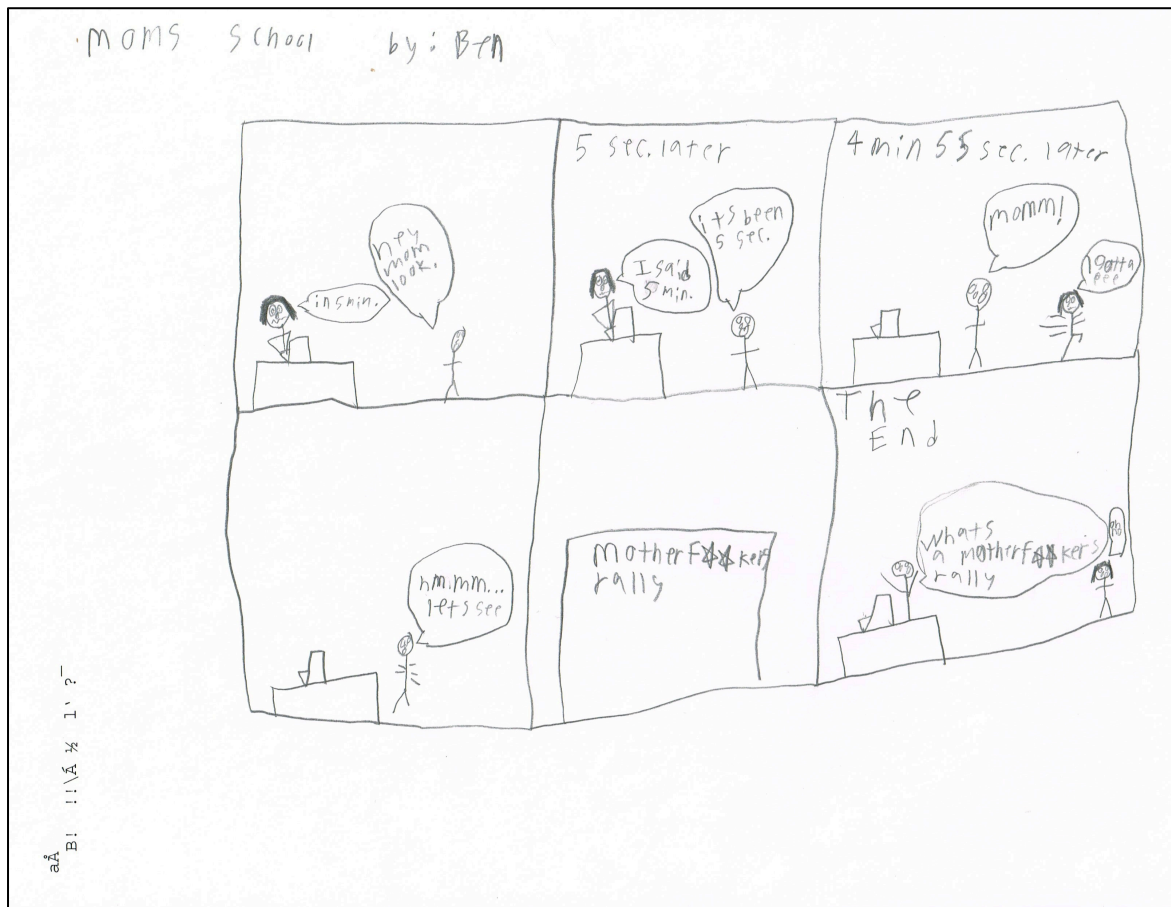


Figure 30: “MotherF\*\*ker’s Rally.” Reading frames from left to right:

**Frame 1:** Ben, “hey mom look” Summer, “in 5 min.”

**Frame 2:** (5 sec. later) Ben, “its been 5 sec.” Summer, “I said 5 min.”

**Frame 3:** (4 min 55 sec. later) Summer (running past Ben), “I gotta pee” Ben, “momm!”

**Frame 4:** Ben (creeping toward Summer’s desk), “hmmm . . .lets see”

**Frame 5:** (close-up computer screen): MotherF\*\*kers rally

**Frame 6:** Ben “whats a motherf\*\*kers rally?” Summer “oh no” (The End)

The idea of the MotherFucker Campaign was originally conceived when I was taking a class called “The Politics of Motherhood” with Dr. Michelle Hughes Miller in the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies. It was about midway through the semester, and it was my turn to facilitate a class discussion over several of the week’s readings, one of which was Chapter 1 of Maushart’s book *The Mask of Motherhood*. In that chapter, Maushart discusses the gap between parents and non-parents, explaining

that it is two fold: first, she says that “becoming a parent does change you in significant and irreversible ways” (5), and second, telling the “truths” about parenting, particularly motherhood, to non-mothers is completely taboo in our culture. It was the first half of her argument—the part about the knowing that is rooted in experience—that seemed particularly relevant to our class. See, aside from Benjamin, our class was comprised completely of women, most of whom were not parents. The mothers in the class consisted of one student who was expecting her first child, me, and Dr. Hughes Miller. Some of the other students in class wanted to become mothers or wanted to become parents but not mothers (there is a difference!), while others had no desire OR intent to become mothers for various reasons, including feminist political stances that were expressly antinatalist. In short, the class was comprised of an array of different individuals whose collectivity was the very embodiment of the personal, political and feminist disagreements and (dis)interest surrounding maternity in our culture. The (dis)interest and disagreement became apparent in class discussion—often times showing up as gaps and/or silences.

So, as it was my turn to facilitate, I kept mulling over the best way to garner participation despite or perhaps even in light of all these different standpoints. How could I get people talking? How could I help them see that they had an interest? What might make them feel invested? When I teach public speaking, I call this the WIIFM<sup>112</sup>—the what’s in it for me? Basically, it’s an issue of audience relevance—showing your audience how your topic connects to them, but I think WIIFM does a better job of getting to the point. People need to see what is in it for them if they are going to pay

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<sup>112</sup> I did not invent this acronym. We did Toastmaster’s in my 5<sup>th</sup> grade Honors Reading class. The Toastmaster’s instructor, the father of one the other students in my class who volunteered to teach us Public Speaking weekly, used this term. He was fantastic!

attention. The MotherFucker Campaign, at least in part and in its earliest conception, was my WIIFM. But it was also more than that—it wasn't just about garnering interest, but an attempt to connect/illuminate/bypass some of the disagreements surrounding political approaches to motherhood, or at least open up a framework that lent itself to that. Finally, it was im-possible in the Derridean sense, even from the beginning. For the two-pronged campaign to work, motherfuckers and motherfucking had to simultaneously be understood as negative and as a creative possibility. It seemed almost contradictory.

It worked to the extent that it got a conversation going in that class and outside of it. I started talking to more people about the campaign. I talked to people at conferences and also in informal settings; academics and other professionals. Mothers and nonmothers. Not everyone liked it or got it right away, but a lot of people did. Especially other mothers. During these conversations, we imagined what the campaign might look like. I imagined it as performance activism. As I mentioned previously, The MotherFucker Campaign was to be another experiment in voice and visibility, but not just my voice. It was supposed to be participative. The idea was for others to perform, create, to do, and decide what it could be. There would be a website that would act as a platform for conversation and organization, which would also be a place where information—articles, instances, news stories—about motherfucking could be aggregated and circulated; a place for consciousness raising, discussion and organizing. People asked how they could participate. A colleague even purchased and hosted a couple of domains for me: stopmotherfucking.com and mfcampaign.com. It was going to be my dissertation project.

Except that it didn't work out, for various reasons. The MotherFucker Campaign didn't happen, at least not in the way I thought it was going to. In another way, the MF Campaign is happening and also hasn't happened yet; it is in this dissertation in a tiny representative way, but it more so is happening outside of it.

This dissertation is a series of experiments in voice and visibility, experiments and attempts to garner interest, participation, and work through disagreements. The Motherfucker Campaign is NOT Ben's comic, or Mary Kelly's PPD or my translation of either of those things. The MotherFucker Campaign is not the "Open House" performance or "A Lonely Discourse" or "Mother-free Space." It can't be measured or fully represented on the pages of the dissertation. The MotherFucker Campaign (or whatever else you want to call it; change, variation, difference, doing) is comprised of the connections, relationships, and performances that happen in between, outside of, and beyond the pages of the projects and communication discussed in this dissertation. The MotherFucker Campaign is not the dissertation itself, but, rather the products of anything that happened in conjunction with the experiments in the dissertation with regard to garnering interest, conversation, action or even understanding the motherhood problem differently. Any such products are not big things, probably not measurable. And they are not of me, they are not my things. They are relational things. They are the doings by and with others, and include the work of people who have never heard of me, this campaign, or any of the other projects and ideas discussed in this dissertation; little fissures and cracks in the ideological policing of normative, 'good' motherhood. The Motherfucker Campaign is the (im)possible forms of caregiving that become possible. Those moments start with relationships; with moments of contact and

connection to others. Those moments might begin like this, with people seeing things differently and reflecting: Figure 31:<sup>113</sup>

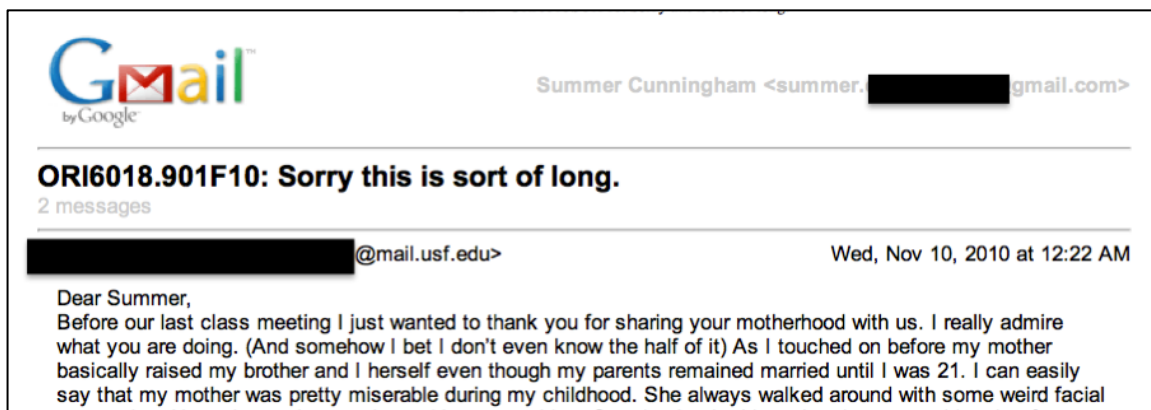


Figure 31: A colleague, who participated in our “Open House” performance and in the Performance Art class sends this email near the end of the Performance Art course that Benjamin and I participated in together.

*Dear Summer,*

*Before our last class meeting I just wanted to thank you for sharing your motherhood with us. I really admire what you are doing. (And somehow I bet I don't even know the half of it) As I touched on before my mother basically raised my brother and I herself even though my parents remained married until I was 21. I can easily say that my mother was pretty miserable during my childhood. She always walked around with some weird facial expression. Not quite mad, not quite sad just something. One day I asked her why she was making that face. She didn't know what I was talking about. About a year ago I finally figured out what that face was expressing. She was doing the best she could and it still wasn't good enough . . . . Sometimes I see the same facial expression on your face that my mom made. You have helped me understand it. No one is taking care of us; we have to take care of one another. That facial expression is not something to be ashamed of. It is something that should be worn proudly because it is exactly that; an expression. It's an expression of how hard you work and the frustration that you feel from the role society has given you. Summer, please don't give up and don't lose your courage. I didn't want my mom to. I can't speak for Ben but, I bet he wouldn't want you to either.*

*If you ever need anything and I am able to help you please just ask. Thank you again for sharing with us!*

<sup>113</sup> For the full transcription of the email, see Appendix II.

\*

Or like this (Figure 32):

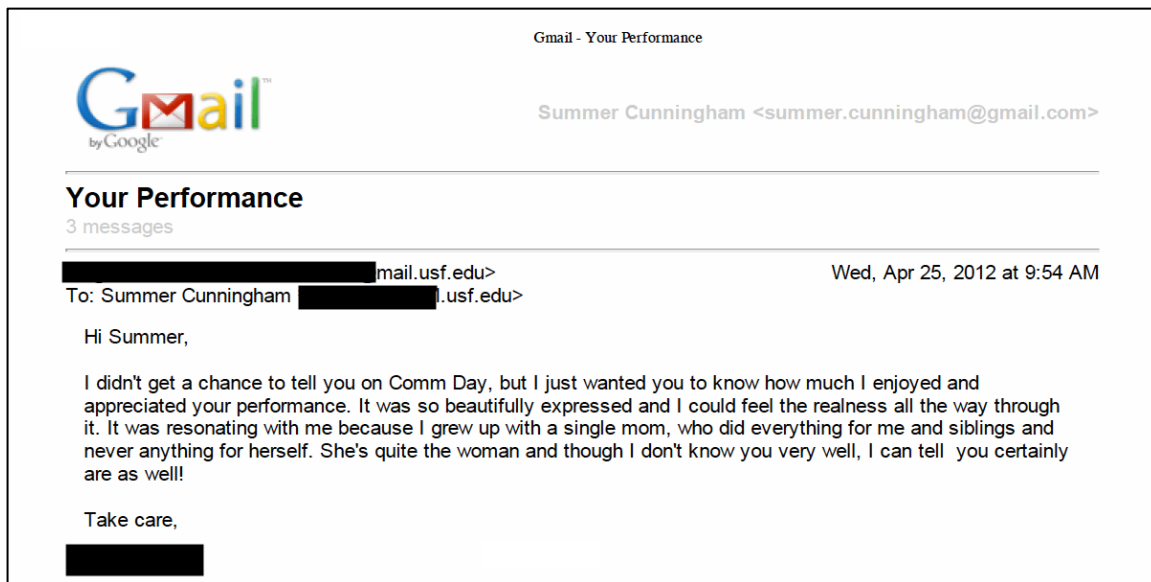


Figure 32: In April 2012, I performed an adaptation of “A Lonely Discourse” for students, faculty and staff at our department’s annual “Communication Day” celebration. I received the following email from a Master’s student; a student I barely knew at the time, who has since become a good friend:

But really, I think the moments look closer to this:

\*

For the last two and-a-half semesters, I have worked at the university writing center as a consultant, assisting undergraduate students, graduate students, and occasionally faculty members with various writing projects. This past summer, as I moved into the final stages of writing this dissertation, I also began bringing my work there for feedback. I wanted to make sure that my writing and my ideas were making sense to other people: people not on my committee or in my department; people not familiar with my project; people who aren’t mothers. Therefore, I intentionally scheduled meetings with people who do not share my disciplinary conventions and people who do not share my life circumstances.

Currently, Andrea, one of the consultants I introduced my work to over the summer, is now in the process of her own dissertation project, and she brings her writing to me for consultation. Last week when she came to see me, she related an interesting moment she had connected to the motherhood problem.

Andrea is not a mother. She is a single woman; an international doctoral student from Romania. She teaches classes in ESOL for the university, and she also volunteers at a local community organization where she teaches English to non-native speakers. The classes at the community center are free and students attend them out of their own desire to learn English. Recently, she noticed that one of her regular students, whom she described as particularly bright and engaged, was not coming to her class. Learning English and being in the classes, seemed to be a priority to this student, so Andrea was concerned that she wasn't attending her class. Andrea has seen the woman, a young mother, around the community center with her two small children and it occurred to her that maybe the mother was not coming to her class because there was no one to take care of the children. "So," she told me, "I invited her to bring the children to the class. Now she is coming."

"You told her that, that she could bring the kids to class?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "because of your work, I saw that this might be the issue for her. I mean, I saw her around the community center with the children before this instance, but only after learning about your work, did I see for the first time that this might also be a reason she was not and could not participate in the class."

Andrea and I continued to talk about her decision to invite this mother with her children into the class. She told me, this idea would never have been possible before I met her and she learned more about my work; it simply would not have occurred to her

to extend this invitation to her student; would not have occurred to her that this would be the reason for the student's absence from class. We also talked about that fact that the student herself probably would not have asked Andrea if she could bring the children to class; either the possibility would have not occurred to the student either for a host of possible reasons: the power difference between Andrea as instructor and the student as the student might have made the student uncomfortable about asking, or perhaps because of the social norms around adult educational spaces as child-free spaces, the student herself might not have even conceived bringing the children as a possibility. Either way, this example is important in two ways. First, it shows both the difference and relationship between sight and visibility. Making oneself, one's situation visible, as the mother did by showing up to campus everyday, was not enough for Andrea to *see/understand* why the student was not coming to her class. It was only after Andrea better understood the experience of mothers and understood more about the motherhood problem, via having conversations about it, that she connected the student's motherhood to her absence in the class. Our communication, Andrea's and mine, made something that was previously impossible, possible. Second, this shows the way that other people, people who are not mothers, can change the way they think about and the way we organize care-giving. I didn't intervene in this situation directly. It is something that is beyond this dissertation, but somehow connected to the unmasking/consciousness raising/interest garnered around it. So, Maushart has a point: unmasking motherhood is important, but it is not enough.

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All the experiments herein have their limits as performances. Their real purpose isn't to *do* the work, but to start the work or maybe just the conversation; one where



more people are participating. The limit of the Motherfucker Campaign is that, while it seems as though it does get the conversation going and could potentially garner participative action if it were to build momentum, it might cloud the relational questions that are at issue in any conversation about carework. I think it might be difficult for some to make the connection between love and fucking. And, I do think love is an important part of this conversation. Drawing from Hardt and Negri's work on democracy and the politics of immaterial labor, love is a force that creates new possibilities, new subjectivities, but also new ways of doing and being together.<sup>114</sup> Love is also about connecting to and caring for others. And in both of those ways, I also see love as a force for approaching the motherhood problem.

A final problem with the motherhood problem is that there is not a single solution, no single right way to talk about it that resolves all the disagreements or garners the interest of everyone. What I do know is that these conversations need to happen differently and that the doings do, too. Over my time trying to address the Motherhood Problem and the mother problems, I have had lots of conversations lots of different ways. I have performed formally in front of audiences and I have written different kinds of texts; I have had one-on-one conversations with people I know and with strangers; I have talked to people from my head and my heart; talked about radical ideas like motherfucking and more, but that is not all.

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<sup>114</sup> Hardt and Negri explain: "What we are looking for—and what counts in love—is the production of subjectivity and the encounter of the singularities, which compose new assemblages and constitute new forms of the common" (186). To the extent that the common includes the very relational and care arrangements that sustain and reproduce the culture, I align my work with these politics.

As a single mom, I have also shown up to places where I wasn't *supposed* to with a kid. I performed my motherhood, my single motherhood, openly, strategically, thoughtfully, and sometimes desperately. Sometimes I did this to make a point; sometimes because I simply had no choice. But I wasn't performing alone. People sometimes let me show-up with my kid. Or leave their class early. Or went to get Ben from school when I couldn't be there for him, and/or went to get Ben for me so I could be somewhere else. Other people performed caregiving with me, or for me and Benjamin, in ways that allowed me to perform myself as something other than mother (if only for a moment). I think my visibility as a single mother, so often with Ben in tow, served a part in the making of those moments. However, I also think that making the performances of others visible is an important part of imagining new possibilities. Over the course of our relationship, and particularly over the course of our time in Tampa while I engaged on this project, various people performed care for and with my child in different ways and to different capacities, and it all mattered to us and felt like love. Moreover, these relational acts made the impossible possible—including the work of this dissertation. I considered putting this long-yet-incomplete list in the Appendix or in the Acknowledgements, but I feel strongly that it belongs in the text:

- Thank you Amelia Ayers for dancing with us, cooking with us, playing with us. For hanging out with Ben so that I could do other things; for taking him to the airport when I couldn't; and also for caring for Garfield like he was your own.
- Thank you Dr. Michael LeVan not only for letting Benjamin come sit in in your Philosophy of Communication class on that Spring evening when he could not

bear to be alone in my office another minute, but for also welcoming him into our discussion as a participant.

- Thank you, Candice Cunningham, for relocating to Tampa. I know it wasn't for us, but we're so glad you're near. Thank you for taking Benjamin overnight so that I could go to conferences and so that I could go on dates and not have to worry if I didn't want to come home until the next morning.
- Thank you Dr. Michelle Hughes Miller for permitting me to arrive late every week to your *Politics of Motherhood* course; for understanding that I was rushing to pick-up my son from afterschool care in between your class and another, for making it possible for me to stay enrolled in both classes. I was just going through my emails looking for some other piece of correspondence and I saw that every week during that semester I sent you an email with the subject line "Class Today," the contents of which always said the same thing: 'I am so sorry but I am probably going to be a few minutes late because I am picking-up my son.' Thank you also for the times you permitted Benjamin to sit-in on class. It helped to minimize some of the time he spent sitting alone while I attended to coursework, but it created opportunities for him to learn so much. I'll never forget the night when we were on our way home from your class and he articulated a theoretically sound argument about the virtues of lesbian-separatism.
- Thank you Dr. Elizabeth Bell for letting me take your *Performance as Communication Teaching Practicum* during my first summer at USF even though it meant that I would arrive late for every single class meeting for the entire first half of the term due to kid drop-off. You are an amazing teacher, and it was an honor to participate in your course; it was such an important part of my

pedagogical development. Thank you also for inviting Benjamin to listen to your lecture on the “U.S. Feminisms” during your *Gender and Performance* class in the summer of 2012. That following fall, as a freshman in high school, Benjamin cited you and that particular class lecture in a response essay he wrote about Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour.” Not only did he understand the reasons that a woman would experience surprising feelings of freedom upon hearing about the untimely death of her husband, but he understood why, given that this piece was published in 1894, the story would have been received with great controversy. I can’t imagine that most teenage boys—or teenagers period for that matter—in the year 2012 divining the socio-historical significance of that publication, at least at first glance. I know the things he learned in your class made that possible.

- Thank you Dr. Fred Steier for encouraging me to pursue and reflect on doing research with Benjamin, for pointing me toward the work and ideas of others valued the epistemological and ontological contributes made by children in both academic and other worldly pursuits.
- Thank you Dr. Amanda Firestone for being one of our first friends here. For letting us tag a long on your road trip to Atlanta and for making us pancakes in your home.
- Thank you Dr. Ken Cissna for making time to attend a meeting between me and the graduate school to ensure that my stipend issues were corrected, ultimately ensuring that I could put food on the table. Thank you for, in private after that meeting, offering to help out if we needed something to get by until my check arrived.

- Thank you Dr. Stacy Holman Jones for always talking to Benjamin as a person, not a little child, for *seeing* him and letting him know that you saw him, for the little gestures that might have seemed small to you, but that nurtured and cultivated his interests in performance. Thank you for inviting him into your Performance Art class and for giving us both the opportunity to work together and learn for one another, for inviting both of us into your home, for making us feel welcome and included, especially on holidays and at a time when we felt so far from our old home, but not yet at home in the new one.
- Thank you Dr. Lori Roscoe for writing immediately to the dean of the Graduate School when my stipend funds were missing for the second semester in a row. I had my check the next day. I was able to pay my rent and feed my son because you took the time to send that email.
- Thank you Libby Jeter for hanging out with my son and me on so many occasions; for making and sharing meals with us, for always seeing that there were two of us.
- Thank you Tasha Rennels for picking-up Ben from school when I couldn't be there, for attending Ben's school performances with me, and for letting me bitch and vent about motherhood and share my inadequacies and doubt, and for never making me feel like I was a bad mother.
- Thank you Dr. Ellen Klein for being Ben's other mother, Ben's Jewish mother, and also for **not** being Ben's mother so that he felt comfortable approaching you about the things that he would not bring up to me. Thank you for feeding us, clothing us, and letting us crash at your house because we were tired and worked late or because we needed to be near others. Thank you for caring for my son so

that I could go to academic conferences and not worry. Thank you for the kitchen-table conversations. Thank you for all the million things I cannot even begin to list here. Thank you for loving him and for loving us.

- Thank you Korrie Bauman for being one of our first friends in Tampa. For caring for Ben and for seeing and treating him like a person, not a child; for making him feel loved and special when he was far away from the family that would normally make him feel that way. For making him feel special in ways that I could not. For buying our groceries when I could not.
- Thank you Dr. Mahuya Pal for permitting me to leave a few minutes early from your *Communication and Resistance* seminar every week for an entire semester so that I could pick-up my son from afterschool care and return to campus for my next seminar without missing half of that class. Moreover, thank you for granting me the opportunity to do so when I first mentioned to you my scheduling/pick-up conflicts, and thank you for never making a big deal about it. I **loved** your class, and I hated even missing a few minutes of it, but I am eternally grateful for those few minutes each week as they alleviated much stress from my life and made it possible for me to take two classes that were of great importance to my academic program.
- Thank you Dr. David Lee for giving us our first place to stay in Tampa, and for nerding out with Benjamin about Star Wars and Dr. Who and other things that I cannot even begin to understand.
- Thank you Dr. Daniel Blauer and Miranda for trusting me, when you didn't even know me, to borrow your car for weeks after I placed a desperate plea on the GCA

list-serv after an injury to both of my feet. I would not have been able to get myself for my son to school without your help.

- Thank you David Jenkins for being so open to Ben's participation in the Performance Art class. Benjamin was captivated by your performances in that class, and I believe it inspired and influenced him as a performer. Thank you for your willingness to phone-in a call to help get him into a Performing Arts school when his other school closed suddenly, and, most of all, thank you for folding our laundry thrice (I still don't know how that happened) during the "Open House" performance.
- Thank you Dr. David Purnell and Steve Johns, for being our friends and giving us a place to live. Thank you driving me around Tampa, to doctor's appointments, to school, to pick-up Ben at the airport, when my feet were in braces and boots and I couldn't drive. Thank you for making it possible to be the places I needed to be to do the motherwork and my other work. And, especially, thank you David for the night at OSCLG for walking to the drug store to get me cold medicine and for then leaving me alone to sleep. That was the **best** rest I've had in graduate school, and it felt so nice for someone to be taking care of me when I was sick.
- Thank you Dr. Carolyn Day for staying with Benjamin while I was away at a conference, for cooking meals in our home so I could have a break from cooking, and for being a good friend to both me and Ben.
- Thank you Sheila Gobes-Ryan for having us to your home for dinner and for teaching Benjamin how to cook! I know others in Benjamin's future with thank you for this, also. Thank you for the dishes, and towels, and lamps and furniture you gave and lent us when we had not enough things to furnish a home. Thank

you for randomly bringing me beautiful flowers to look at while I worked and wrote. How did you know I needed something beautiful to keep me going? How did you know that I **love** flowers, but no one ever brings me flowers?

- Thank you Zoe Fine for loving Benjamin and me; for cooking for and with us; and for helping him with all the math that I do not know how to do and that you do so well.
- Thank you Kristen Blinne for being such a good friend to us, for inviting BOTH of us to all the grad school things, formal and informal. Thank you for taking Benjamin to school events when I couldn't, and for making me feel like I was accepted wholly, not matter what the context, as both an academic, friend, and mother.
- Thank you to our friends and neighbors: Laura Starkey for taking Benjamin to school on early mornings when he missed the bus. Thank you Steppe Family for always keeping an eye on us and the house, and for making Benjamin feel welcomed and loved, and sometimes like a big brother to Noah and Emmy.
- Thank you Michael Schlein (and Amy, Carson, Caroline, and Michael III) for making us feel like part of your family. For keeping Ben so that I could go to conferences and for keeping Garfield so that Ben and I both could go visit our far-away family. Thank you for giving us a place to stay when our house was uninhabitable, for taking us to beaches and theme parks, and for sustaining us with food, libation and love on so many occasions. Thank you, Michael, for the many, many times that you picked-up Benjamin from school or work, and for talking to him about home and family; for advocating for the care I do as his mother.



- Thank you Dr. Carolyn Ellis for allowing me to create a collaborative research project in your *Qualitative Methods* course with my 11 year-old son, for inviting him into the class to discuss the research process, and most of all for creating space for his voice, particularly during the research presentations. I know he felt that his voice was heard, and that was the point of this project. Thank you also for all the notes, publication notifications, and books concerning research on mothering and doing research with children that you have slipped in my box subsequently over the years.
- Thank you Dr. Liz Edgecomb for inviting Benjamin into your Performing Young Adult Literature class to witness what the college kids were doing during our first year in Tampa; for giving him weeks and weeks of looking forward to me going off to my graduate class when otherwise would have spent those evenings alone in my office.
- Thank you Maddie Southard and Dr. Abe Khan for inviting us to your home for ‘Friendsgiving,’ for being part of the audience while Benjamin performed, and for all the other ways you’ve made us feel like family.
- Thank you Dr. Emily Ryalls for inviting Benjamin to be the Comm Day paparazzi during our first year at USF; for making him feel like he was included in this department; for giving him a role.

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Thinking about motherhood in variations—as experience, relationship, selfhood, institution, and performance—provide different ways for understanding, examining, and addressing the motherhood problem. I end with motherhood as a performance because I believe that performance provides the richest way for conceptualizing all the things

that motherhood is comprised of, and for understanding the various ways in which it operates. Motherhood is a performance of the social organization of kinship, care and reproductive labor. Motherhood, like all cultural performances, is a historically situated, social accomplishment—a collective production—constituted by various members of the culture via an array of communicative acts and interactions that include the embodied enactment of contemporary (non)normative ideological discourses and moralities, particularly those connected to sex, sexuality, family, gender, and kinship. Motherhood in turn produces subjectivities, relationships, moralities, ways of being with and for one another, and rules about social roles connected to caregiving work. The forces of good motherhood, which in contemporary Western culture include neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, shape our performance of Motherhood and its products. Ultimately, the contemporary standards of good motherhood produce arrangements in which women, all women, are appreciated first and foremost for their supposed reproductive capacity, a culture where a select portion of the population is burdened with and uncompensated for the majority of the reproductive and care work, a culture where women have limited capacities because they are conceived as limited potentialities. However, if motherhood—the contemporary way for organizing kinship, reproduction and carework—is a performance, a doing, then there is reason to think that it can be undone. Or, in the very least, done differently. That performance, also, must be a collective endeavor.

Finally, while resolving disagreement and addressing the (dis)interest surrounding the motherhood problem is probably an impossible task, addressing the problem is not impossible, particularly if there are other frames, other variations, both

theoretic and pragmatic, for doing so. So, for now, I'll end with a message borrowed from the MotherFucker Campagin Manifesto:

“We have to perform, not just identities and subjectivities differently, but imagine and perform our relationships differently. We have to produce new possibilities from this place of impossibility. We can do it. Mothers do it everyday.”

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## APPENDIX I:

### ADDITIONAL “OPEN HOUSE” DOCUMENTS

#### Original “Open House” Artist Statement

Summer and Ben Present: Give and Take  
(Take Something, Make Something?)  
Open House

*Overview.* This performance is about the everyday, the mundane and the not so mundane, creation, chance, invitation, reversal, participation, collaboration, home, public/private, community, borders/boundaries, space, risk, vulnerability, interruption, and life. Our life. And maybe yours, also.

For Benjamin, this is an opportunity for our peers to see into our everyday, to see what our life is like right now, and maybe that will give them a better idea as to who we are as human beings in our society.

For Summer, this is also an opportunity to extend her current interests with regard to the intersection of (single)motherhood and academia. Although much of her (and Ben’s) everyday lived experiences happen at USF, there is much in life that doesn’t happen there. A large portion of our lives are lived in our homes. Summer’s larger project involves making visible to her academic community the complicated, messy, “accidentally miraculous” (Johstone), stressful, beautiful, contradictory, give-and-take elements of everyday life for a single-mother-headed family. However, when those aspects of her life are only glimpsed from within the walls of the university, it offers a very limited view. This piece offers participants a chance to gain a different perspective. We invite participants to come over and see what happens. We invite participants to come over and see *if* anything happens.

*The Performance.* This piece will be conducted in at least three spaces at varying and overlapping times/durations.

1. **Place:** Performance Lab  
**Time/Duration:** Thursday Sept. 23, 2010 at approximately 8:00 PM; 5-7 minutes
2. **Place:** Our Home  
**Time/Duration:** Thursday Sept. 23, 2010 – Thursday Sept. 30, 2010, 8 days
3. **Place:** USF Installation/Performance Space  
**Time/Duration:** Friday Sept. 24, 2010 - Thursday Sept. 30, 2010, 7 days

For this performance, we’ve decided to open our home to our class for one week. During our in-class performance (#1), members of the class community will receive an invitation to our open house along with keys to our front door. Participants will be

permitted to enter our home (#2) whenever they wish (if they wish) for the duration of the performance using their keys. This will provide an opportunity for members to come observe and/or participate in a part of our daily lives that they normally do not have access to. (Note: we are on a limited budget in life, and have, therefore, limited the budget of this project to \$20. Accordingly, we could not afford to make a key for everyone. Therefore, we will group the class randomly and leave it up to each group to determine how they will share their key.)

Benjamin and I intend to go about our daily lives during this performance. We will attend school, work, cook, eat, hang-out with friends, study, and so on. However, since we are presenting this as an open house and open houses are typically party/gathering events, we will offer some additional, optional, and potentially creative activities for our guests to engage in when they are in our home. These activities will consist of a “Daily Offering” that will change each day, an ongoing “Chance” offering that will remain constant/available throughout the performance, and an “Art”-making station, which will also be available throughout the entire performance. In the spirit of giving and taking, we’d like to ask anyone accepting our offer to please give something in return.

Finally, we realize that it might not be possible for everyone to come to our open house, and also accept the fact that some class members might not wish to attend. However, we want to provide the opportunity for everyone to participate in our performance at some level. For this reason, we’ve asked each class member to bring us (1) a favorite song and (2) an item that represents them. We will incorporate these items into our performance at some point (though we’re not exactly sure how just yet). Additionally, we will set up a small “Leftover” station in the Performance Installation Space where we will provide anything leftover from the prior day’s “Daily Offering.”

*Outcome.* We hope we can incite creative participation from class members, and we hope that this will give you an opportunity to get to know us better/differently, and vice-versa. We’re interested to see how, if at all, this process will affect the dynamic of our class community.

Finally, we’re also interested in how this experiment might inform our future projects. Additionally, we hope that we’ve designed a project that is open to your experimentation, questions, and critiques; and we think it would be wonderful if this piece could somehow inform your future work.

## “Open House” Invitation

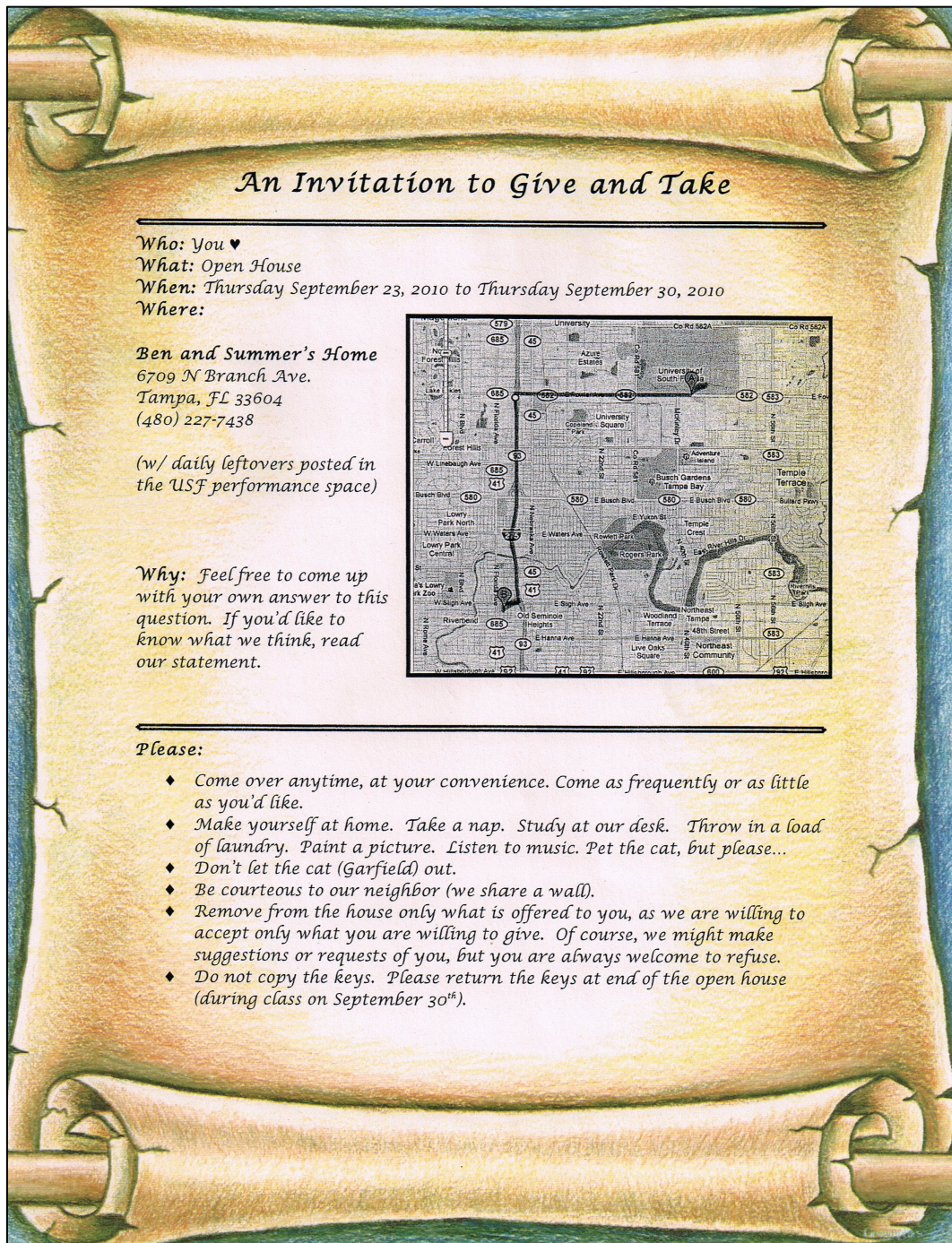


Figure A1: “Open House” invitation.

### Prompts from the “Open House” ‘Chance Bowl’

(Visitors/guests could draw slips of paper from the bowl. Below are the directions they would receive. Over the duration of the performance we had someone ‘make a sandwich’ and ‘take a stroll around the neighborhood.’ )

- Make a sandwich
- Clean the cat box. The litter box is located in Ben’s room (a.k.a, “The Blackhole”). There are plastic grocery/produce bags in the black, old-fashioned kitchen cabinet (lower left hand side when you’re facing it).
- Play with Garfield, but don’t let him out. You can find some cat toys...
- Sweep the floor. The broom is off the kitchen near the washer/dryer.
- Can you make Ben’s lunch for tomorrow? Thanks!
- Hug someone you love.
- Use the art supplies to create a picture for our wall.
- Take a stroll around our neighborhood. Bring us back a souvenir.
- Choose a gift from the gift ball.
- Make a stop animation using these four Lego guys.
- Choose a book from the bookshelf and read some of it.
- Take a picture with Garfield.
- Take double today’s offering.
- Take another offering and share it with somebody you love.

## APPENDIX II:

### FULL TRANSCRIPTION OF LETTER FROM FIGURE 31

Dear Summer,

*Before our last class meeting I just wanted to thank you for sharing your motherhood with us. I really admire what you are doing. (And somehow I bet I don't even know the half of it) As I touched on before my mother basically raised my brother and I herself even though my parents remained married until I was 21. I can easily say that my mother was pretty miserable during my childhood. She always walked around with some weird facial expression. Not quite mad, not quite sad just something. One day I asked her why she was making that face. She didn't know what I was talking about. About a year ago I finally figured out what that face was expressing. She was doing the best she could and it still wasn't good enough. My mother literally woke up at 3 in the morning to get ready for work and then worked a full 8 hour shift, came home to my brother and I and then carted us around to practice for whatever sport we were in at the time. She would come home cook us dinner, sit down with us to help us with our homework, go to bed only to wake up and do it all over again. The facial expression she was making was due to the way she felt. She felt like she had to do it all because if she didn't my father wouldn't. Her facial expression was a result her taking on all of the responsibilities of a family without the other person doing their share. You'd think that her friends would see this and help her out but, guess what, just like you probably don't have time to go on a date, my mom didn't have time for friends. I cannot tell you one friend that my mother had while I was growing up. Yes, she got along with everyone and all of my friends loved her and my friends parents loved her but really when you think of what a friend is, she didn't have any. She never just hung out and had time to herself.*

*As I become older I increasingly feel what it is like to actually be a woman. When I graduated with my bachelors I was only 21. I had one hell of a time finding a job. Then when I did it sucked so bad that I would cry on the way to work. I didn't get paid shit and I ran a small sign shop for a new owner that didn't know what he was doing. I caught on faster than he did to how things had to be run and then eventually that resulted in me doing everything. One day I was driving to work and I saw a U-turn in the median. I turned around and went home never looking back. I felt bad for doing that to the owner but, I came to the realization that someone had to think about me because nobody else was.*

*You always hear about wives taking care of their husbands. Who the fuck takes care of*

*their wives? Right now I work just as much as my boyfriend. (actually recently I have been working more hours than him) We split all the bills exactly in half. He makes more money than I do and does less around the house. I swear at times I want to scream, kick, punch and maybe even bite someone or something at times. What the fuck!?! He isn't a bad person, I feel as if he had been conditioned to act the way he is. If I am hungry-- [whine] to mom, if there is no pan to cook my food in-- wine to mom, if I am thirsty-- wine to mom. Later in life I feel this had turned into me. Mom. It isn't just him, just about every guy I have dated doesn't want to do shit themselves, and they want to delegate it to someone else. I believe that we are all equal and that we should strive to share our responsibilities of life together. When humans are considered "man" I want to be an equal part of that. I don't want to get stuck doing all the shit that no one else wants to do. The shit that men don't want to do. I really honestly believe that is what women are in today's society. We go to work just as much as men to make a living and then when we come home we do our second job—Caregiver. But, who the fuck is taking care of us? Who is taking care of the girlfriends, the wives, and the mothers? Fucking no one! Oh but wait, some women don't work. There are sugar daddy's out there. I am well aware of that and have contemplated that option and decided against it. I swore that I wouldn't be dependent on a man for my finances—to take care of me. I am too scared that he would hold money over my head and not let me have the same control over it as he and use it to control me. There is so much more I could blab about but, this is getting long and I don't want to take up more of your valuable time. I know you don't have enough of it. I really just wanted you to know that your sharing of motherhood has really helped me see the role society has placed upon me and the courage to keep combating against it. You have helped me understand my mother on a higher level and I admire her for what she has given up for me. I admire you for not giving up. She did, she lost the courage. It is okay though, she passed it on to me. Don't give up and don't lose your courage. Sometimes I see the same facial expression on your face that my mom made. You have helped me understand it. No one is taking care of us; we have to take care of one another. That facial expression is not something to be ashamed of. It is something that should be worn proudly because it is exactly that; an expression. It's an expression of how hard you work and the frustration that you feel from the role society has given you. Summer, please don't give up and don't lose your courage. I didn't want my mom to. I can't speak for Ben but, I bet he wouldn't want you to either.*

*If you ever need anything and I am able to help you please just ask. Thank you again for sharing with us!*