

ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION - POSITION PIECE

On Queerness, Motherhood and the Gift of Belonging

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This piece reflects on my experience as an intern for the journal *Studies in the Maternal*. I wish to suggest that this internship was something more than just an accumulation of professional skills. Starting from the discomfort of belonging as a queer woman, to a community structured around motherhood, I suggest that it is the disembodied image of the mother—psychoanalytically, and sociologically sustained—that did not allow me to explore links between queerness and the maternal in the first place. I then draw on a personal vignette about maternal friendships to consider homosociality as an often-forgotten structure of support alongside heteronormative family structures. Finally, I show that the capacity to psychically hold together queerness and the maternal (queer as maternal, and motherhood as queer), can be engendered only after the question of how one belongs—peculiarly, queerly, uncomfortably, embarrassingly, socially—has been raised.

Returning

Sometime in autumn 2015, I started working as an Editorial Assistant for *Studies in the Maternal*. Through this editorial position, I was quickly exposed to the subject of motherhood and questions around maternal ethics. As a queer woman, I had not previously been preoccupied with the issue of motherhood for myself, but it was my encounter with *MaMSIE*, to some extent, which forced me to consider the matter. This piece reflects on my experience as an intern for the journal *Studies in the Maternal*. I wish to suggest that this internship was something more than just an accumulation of professional skills. This is because engaging with motherhood and the maternal, even through an editorial position, is in itself a disruptive experience. It invites one to consider what it means to be a subject that has been mothered, who can mother, who does or does not want to become a mother. It also invites one to ponder on the proliferation of contemporary representations of mothers—failing, excessive, frantic, omnipotent, hysteric, sexualised, misrepresented, boring, cruel, deserting, frail and devouring. As Jacqueline Rose points out, any intellectual task involving mothers sits in uncomfortable proximity with both love and cruelty.¹ For these reasons, thinking about (our) mothers is inevitably and irreparably unsettling.

Engaging with motherhood from a queer perspective creates an added disjuncture. As Lee Edelman has argued, in being excluded from biological, heteronormative forms of reproduction, queer individuals pose a challenge to futurity.² Instead of being guided by an ethical horizon generated by the capacity to reproduce (the exhausted motif of creating a better world for one's children), queer sexualities embody the withdrawal from the possibility of a liveable future, occupying the place of negativity and death in contemporary culture. As a queer woman, my internship in *MaMSIE* was haunted by this particular deadly trajectory which, in the way I experienced it back then, stood in opposition to what I thought as maternal ethics. To illustrate this disjuncture more clearly, I wish to return to some of the online, remote

¹ Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2018).

² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

and intellectual encounters that took place during my internship at MaMSIE. By asking why I unwittingly ignored the physical, embodied dimension of motherhood back then, I hope to reflect on what being an intern in MaMSIE means to me now.

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The Mother in the Workplace: the ‘No-body’

I wrote two short pieces for the MaMSIE blog: one on how the underfunding of the NHS has created the urge to centralise obstetric units in the UK, closing down local ones; and one about the missing refugee children in trafficking networks across Europe since the Syrian war. Both of those pieces helped me think about how large economic and political phenomena affect the lives of those most vulnerable. Returning to these pieces, some three years and a PhD degree later (a form of birth in its own terms), I am struck by two things: first, by how pertinent these questions remain today; and second, and most crucially, by how my writing about motherhood profoundly mismatched the proliferation of personal, reflective, physical, bodily writing that the maternal has come to occupy in queer scholarship. For example, in *The Argonauts* (2015), a show-stopping account of queer family-making, Maggie Nelson invites us to think of pregnancy as the work of constantly withdrawing from ‘falling forever, going to pieces.’³ There is an active effort of keeping it together, while the whole body stretched at its limits edges disintegration. Although Baraitser has

³ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House UK, 2015), 104.

argued that motherhood needs to be explored beyond the question of natality (challenging thus the assumption that the origins of the maternal subject lie in child-birth), she suggests that motherhood feels like a similar rupture; an ‘interruption’ as she calls it which I think makes a pledge for thinking the maternal in relation to a grounded presence and physicality—⁴beyond melodrama, detachment, idealisation and sacredness.

To further clarify the links between physicality and the maternal, I turn to another small piece I prepared for MaMSIE’s Facebook page, which commented on the witty banter that took place between James Cameron and Jeremy Corbyn during Prime Minister Questions in February 2016. The two men’s short exchange revolved around what their mothers would urge them to do in that current political juncture. In both Cameron’s and Corbyn’s fantasies, the ‘mother’ featured as a disembodied ethical figure: in the case of Cameron, inspiring patriotism by tidying up the messiness of masculinity (in his words ‘to straighten your tie and sing the national anthem’), and in the case of Corbyn, endorsing socialism by blasting austerity policies and condemning the underfunding of the NHS. From their perspective, the figure of the mother is there to be narcissistically possessed as being on their side. While editing this short post, I remember reading through it, again and again, to find the words failing me that would express what I felt was going on in this exchange. There was a similar debate between Herbert Marcuse and his close friend Norman Brown, two post-Freudian philosophers who lived and worked in America in the 1950s. In their writings, they discuss how the new psychoanalytic, political subject can manage the life and death drives.⁵ Marcuse and Brown link the problem of the drives to the problem for the mother who is seen in an ambiguous place: while the undifferentiated union with the mother promises relief from conflict and ambivalence, it is the forbidden desire for fusion that causes the subject’s incommensurate suffering. As Jacqueline Rose puts it, in the patriarchal imaginary, the mother marks both the

⁴ Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966[1955]); Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, 2nd ed. (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1985[1959]).

desired object and the object wished 'out of here' or wished dead.⁶ Is it, then, that the 'mother' becomes sacred, idealised—taking the form of a law or an ethical guide—so that she, her body can be protected from our murderous attacks?

Perhaps I was too lazy to do the work of thinking through Corbyn and Cameron's witty exchange back when I was an Editorial Intern, thus failing to notice the disembodied mother in their accounts: the mother is all law, no-body. Yet, if we accept that there is no such thing as 'laziness' from a psychoanalytic perspective, what was it that interrupted the process of imagining the mother as embodied in their accounts? Was it not the impossibility of thinking myself *as* a mother in an embodied way? Worse, was it not the impossibility of thinking myself as the daughter of a mother with a body (whatever this entails)? And even worse, was it not the impossibility of thinking of myself as the queer daughter of a non-queer mother?

Mothers Against the Future—or How I Realised my Mom's Queerness

When I received the invitation to contribute to the 10th anniversary issue of *Studies in the Maternal*, it was the same time as Penny, my mother's best friend and long-term colleague passed away. Penny and my mom had been working together for more than a decade and had successfully implemented strategies to encourage recycling and to inspire environment-friendly behaviours among school students in Achaia—a province of Peloponnese in Greece. Besides their commitment to combating pollution and making the world a better place, Penny and my mother shared losses and separations in many different ways. Both suffered from chronic health conditions. Both had seen their children migrate abroad amidst the misery of the ten-year financial, social and political Greek crisis. Both saw their salaries and pension schemes axed at an age when they relied on them most. And both found mostly unhappiness in their declining marriages. Penny's loss left both my mother and me bereft, not only because she was a wonderful person and I was used to her presence, especially during my long summer breaks in our summerhouse when they used to play cards and cook and chat after their morning swim. But with Penny, I felt that we were

⁶ Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*.

unwittingly sharing the task of maintaining a loving relationship with my ageing mother. My absence (since I was living abroad) and Penny's presence gave me a sense of solace that my mother was being cared for. Their friendship also helped me reconfigure my relationship with my mother from the perspective of homosociality. This is because their alliance of sustenance stretched the bonds of care outside the space of the heteronormative family, which in turns, problematised the fantasy of the 'nuclearity' of the family. As such, it allowed me to imagine a previously unimaginable connection between queerness and motherhood. Penny's kind and caring presence aided the puncturing of an exclusively heterosexual system of support. Through her life and death, Penny embodied a maternal dependence on female friendships as homosocial forms of care, which eventually allowed me to envisage my mother as, in her own way, queer.

Belonging

Throughout this piece, I have suggested that the internship at MaMSIE was nothing but an ordinary professional experience. And it is the same extra-ordinariness that permeated the email invitation to write about it. Listing all the first names of every intern of MaMSIE during the last ten years in chronological order, as if Sigal and Lisa were speaking to all of us, to every one of us, made me think of this invitation as an invitation to reflect on how I belong to this community of maternal subjects. For Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, community (or *Communitas*) is both a gift and a duty, an obligation.⁷ First, it is a gift because it engenders a question for retrospection (what did the internship on MaMSIE mean to you?) and offers the space for putting it out there. Second, in Esposito's understanding, community is a duty because it demands that we do the work of belonging by suspending our identifications with those social categorisations that pull us together or draw us apart. Esposito's *communitas* is not what is communally shared ('we are all mothers and fathers'). Rather, it is about holding contradictory, murky, and embarrassing parts of ourselves together (being queer and maternal, being maternal without being a mother). Belonging, in

⁷ Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

this sense, is a duty because it creates the social, intellectual and psychic space where this work of 'holding together' our pieces needs to be done. Using the space offered by the community to repair the ruptures in ourselves is, after all, the greatest gift MaMSIE has given to me. Holding together the 'queer' and the 'maternal,' psychically, physically, socially is the gift, I hope, I have been able to give back.

In loving memory of Penny.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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