

# Introduction:

## Becoming – Matrescence and Performance

*We must destroy all these notions of love, faith, family, motherhood, companionship, which were not created by us and thus replace them with new ones in accordance with our sensibility, with our wishes.*

(Export 1973: n.pag.)

*And perhaps a feminist is someone who possesses this personalising trait to a larger than average degree: she is an autobiographer, an artist of the self. She acts as an interface between private and public, just as women always have, except that the feminist does it in reverse. She does not propitiate: she objects. She's a woman turned inside out.*

(Cusk 2012: 15)

### *Myths and Truths*

In 2006, while heavily pregnant, British African Caribbean artist Elsa James created a performance for film called *150 Lies, Myths and Truths* (Figure 1.1). James is a conceptual artist, activist and writer who works with live performance, film, print, spoken word, neon and sound.<sup>1</sup> Described as a '[p]erformance-to-camera filmed on [c]amcorder video with A to Z of 150 labels onto expectant tummy', the film shows James, nude, in a dark space, with her face and body slightly illuminated and a series of white words being projected onto her pregnant belly. From B-D of the alphabet includes the words:

Booty Queen, Brown Girl. Brown Skin G'al, Brownin, Bun, Buppie, Burr Head, Bush Woman, Caramel, Caribbean, Caribbean Queen, Chocolate, Coco, Coffee, Coca Cola Bottle, Colored, Colored Lady, Colored Woman, Coon, Dancehall Lady. Dark Lady, Dark Meat, Dark Skinned G'al, Darkey, Devil Woman.

(James, 2006)

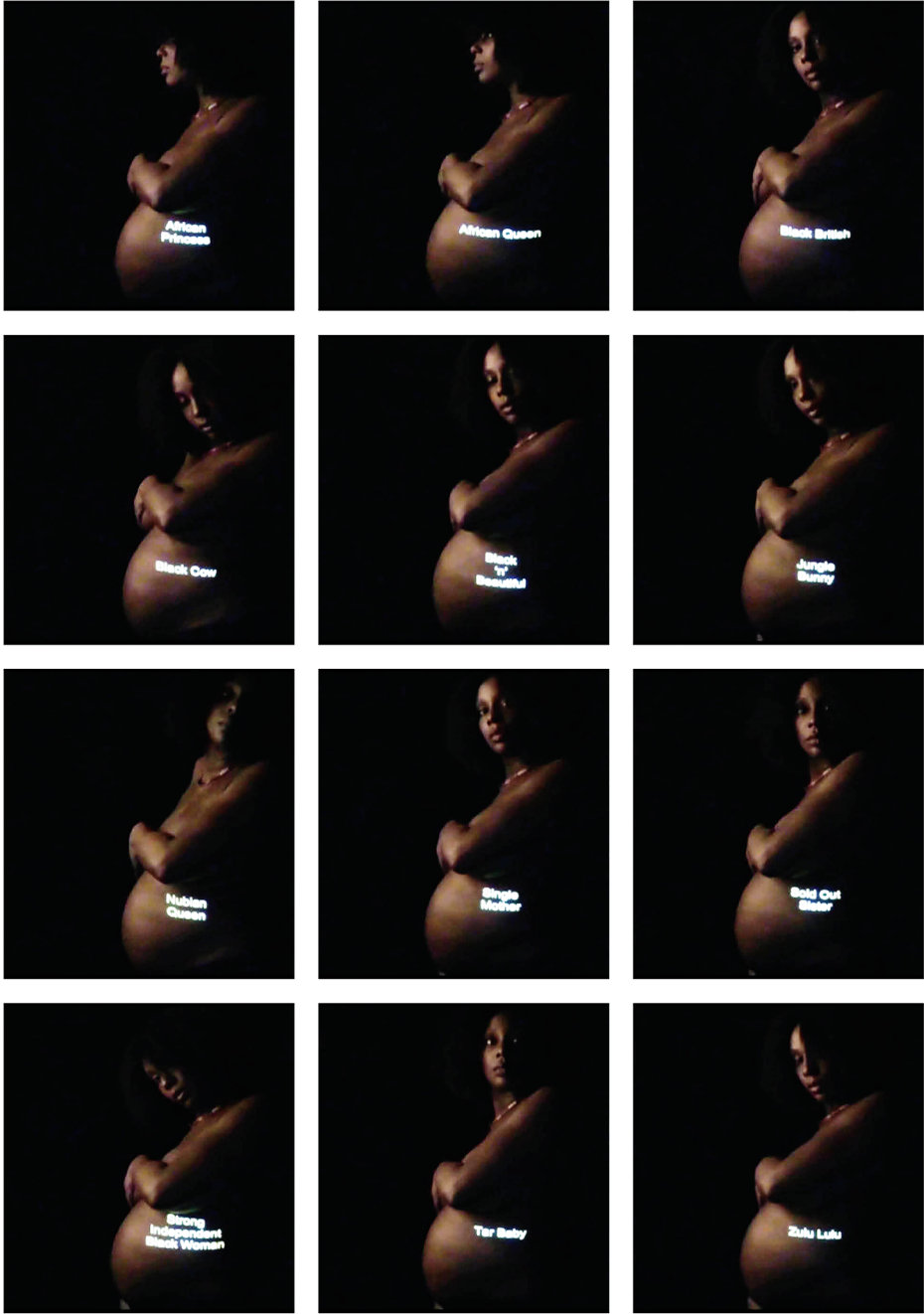


FIGURE I.1: Elsa James. Video still from *150 Lies, Myths and Truths* (2006). Image courtesy of the artist.

James' work speaks to the intersection of myths around race and gender and how systemic racism and histories of enslavement perpetuate mythical versions of Black women. Desiree Lewis notes that racial myths are a binary symbolic activity in which allegories of white and black, good and evil and subject and object are part of the nexus of patriarchal and racist hierarchies (1992: 36). James describes this work as 'a film made in response to a pregnancy scan confirming I was having another girl and thinking about the multitude of terms that exist in the world – both historical and contemporary, for black girls and women' (2006). These labels, hovering over the child still in utero, suggest that she is already being judged and categorised because of her sex and race. Akeia A. F. Benard argues that current capitalist racialised 'notions of gender and gendered notions of race' are 'not by-products of colonial enterprise, but foundational to it' (2016: 1). Curator Hettie Judah, who included James' work as part of the 2023 *Re-Naissance* exhibition, describes the texts as spanning 'racial slurs to gendered pejoratives to terms of affection' (2023). It is not made clear which of the words are the 'lies, myths or truths' that the title refers to, but with the majority being disparaging or discriminatory, they convey the negative tropes and assumptions that are so often projected onto Black female bodies. This glossary shows the expansiveness of the terminology and scope of judgement, comment and sexualised racism which pervades Black lives into which the artist recognises her child will be born. Instead of performing Black motherhood as implicitly strong, James acknowledges the vulnerabilities, risks and fears for her unborn daughter by naming these perceptions that her female child is likely to encounter.

The title of this work also evokes a questioning of the trajectory and development of prejudice. When does a lie or a myth become a truth? When a story is told again and again, it becomes a narrative, and is cemented in some way, as Minna Salami says: 'stories turn into knowledge, and knowledge transforms into matter' (2020: 13). Salami uses the image of a baby in utero to illustrate this example: 'Just as the first structure that forms in the human embryo is the spinal cord, so too is knowledge the spine of all other ideas that shape our lives' (2020: 13). Thus, when these derogatory labels are so frequently reiterated, they become ingrained. Even before her child is born, James suggests she is already under scrutiny, already being judged and condemned to a particular set of possibilities for her identity. Building on the work of Patricia Hill Collins ([1990] 2000), Danielle Procope Bell (2023) discusses tropes of the mammy and welfare queen and how these feed into disparities in Black maternal health. She argues that these stereotypes 'naturalise the inequitable conditions of Black mothers' and that these become reflective of Black mothers' personal choices and failings. Bell claims: 'In this way, these stereotypes become "reality" and seemingly ubiquitous' (2023). J. L. Austin's lecture *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) discussed performative

utterances; when saying something makes it so. James' projection of these silent but powerful namings suggests that usage of these lies and myths can 'make them so' – transforming the projected labels into realities that become fixed.

I open this study on matrescence and performance with James' work as it captures many of the key concerns and questions that have inspired this book. I ask: What happens when a performance artist becomes a mother? What are the social performances of motherhood? How are these depicted and challenged through performance? What can performance do to expand understandings of matrescence when mother/artists use their own bodies to represent matrescence, as opposed to conventional depictions of maternal bodies in art? And finally, how can theoretical concepts that have been used to confine women and mothers, be revisited, recontextualised and reconsidered for feminist purposes? The works selected include depictions of motherhood made by artists who are mostly mothers and use themes of the lived experiences of matrescence, the maternal or mothering as the enquiry or content for the work.

Maternal bodies and processes of pregnancy, childbirth and sustenance have historically been depicted in art and literature as variously uncanny, abject, grotesque, monstrous and hybrid. Societal conventions and myths around what makes a *good* or *bad* mother have limited the representations of maternal ambivalence and labour. Lived experiences of matrescence as depicted by mothers themselves have remained almost invisible with little exposure in galleries (Judah 2024) or mainstream art and media (Jones 2023). Challenging complex and disparaging representations, or the erasure and invisibility of experiences of matrescence altogether, contemporary mother/artists working in the field of performance use their live bodies to subvert dominant images of conventional myths of motherhood. Using strategies of mimesis, liveness, embodiment, relationality and performativity to render their own matrescent bodies, these artists explore historically pejorative theoretical concepts and aesthetics in new, feminist ways. This book frames performance as a site where becoming a mother can be understood as an *unbecoming* and explores less visible and underrepresented aspects of matrescence.

### *Matrescence*

'Matrescence – the time of mother-becoming' (Raphael 1975: 66) describes the physical, psychological and emotional changes experienced during the significant transformation that occurs. Lucy Jones notes that unlike many cultures,

which treat becoming a mother as a major, traumatic life crisis, with special social rites and rituals, Western societies had been failing to recognise matrescence as a

major transition: a transition that involves a whole spectrum of emotional and existential ruptures, a transition that can make women ill, a transition in which the mother, as well as the baby, could be celebrated. We had been failing to care for mothers, or for one another, very well at all.

(2023: 16)

The lack of social ritual, community support and extended family structures that are common in western contexts mean that matrescence can be a ‘metamorphosis’ as Jones describes it, but can also provoke an existential crisis, mental health problems and struggles with coping with everyday life.

When you become a mother, do you become something else? Is matrescence also an *unbecoming*? How do mother/artists who work with autobiographical material to create performance grapple with oscillating experiences of maternal subjectivity in their work? The term *matrescence* is used rather than *parturition* as not all people who become mothers go through childbirth and the terms *maternal* and *motherhood* have the potential to essentialise and ostracise (Šimić and Underwood-Lee 2016: 6).<sup>2</sup> Same-sex couples, trans women, mothers who adopt a child or use a surrogate may not go through the physical act of childbirth but can experience matrescence and neuroscientific research on humans illustrates that caregiver’s brains experience significant plasticity, even without the experience of pregnancy (Jones 2023: 120). Andrea O’Reilly draws attention to the biological dimensions of some women’s lives: menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and mothering in her article ‘Matricentric feminism: A feminism for mothers’:

Mothers can no longer talk about their reproductive identities and experiences without being called essentialist. But maternal scholars do not reduce women’s sense of self to motherhood, nor do they say that this is what makes her a woman or that motherhood is more important than other variables that constitute her self. They say only that motherhood matters and that it is central and integral to understanding the lives of women as mothers. Thus, mothers need a feminism, in both theory and practice, for and about their identities and experiences as mothers.

(2019: 23)

While some advocate for using *parent* rather than *mother*, I use the latter term, not to essentialise the gender of the care-giving, but to acknowledge the history and lineage of the work of those who birth and provide primary care to infants and children. I follow Sara Ruddick who states: ‘At the simplest level, I want to recognize and honor the fact that even now, and certainly throughout most of history, women have been the mothers’ (1989: 44) and I also adopt her conceptual separation of birthing labour from mothering. Many of the ideas I explore

have been historically connected to female (birthing) bodies and have been used to disparage or oppress but as Helen Charman writes in her political history of motherhood, *Mother State*: ‘Not all maternal stories begin in the womb; “mother” is not a category limited only to those who have given birth to a child’ (2024: ix). Ruddick argues that ‘[t]o claim a maternal identity is not to make an empirical generalisation but to engage in a political act’ (1989: 56). This book is concerned with the political act of representing matrescence and its messiness through live, embodied, and unique performances.

### *Expanding Matrescence*

Recent attention on maternal subjectivity in both critical and popular discourse has been notable with behavioural scientist Pragya Agarwal’s acclaimed *(M)otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman* (2021) and the publication of a plethora of motherhood memoirs exploring previously neglected experiences of matrescence. These include queer motherhoods (Lynch 2021); post-natal depression and psychosis (Unsworth 2021; Kinchen 2022; Cho 2020); maternal ambivalence and pregnancy loss (Levy 2022); experiences of Black mothers experiencing systemic racism while adopting (Austin 2019); infertility (Pine 2019) and many more. Performance-makers and theorists Lena Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee’s *Maternal Performance: Feminist Relations* (2021) and *Mothering Performance: Feminist Action* (2023) explore how the maternal is made visible through performance and compares live performance to the maternal as ‘durational, embodied, relational practices’ (2021: 226). Elena Marchevska and Val Walkerdine (2020) and EL Putnam (2022) have contributed to discourse around intergenerational maternal art and digital performance respectively and *An Artist and a Mother* (2023) curated by Tara Carpenter Estrada, Heidi Moller Somsen and Kaylan Buteyn includes visual artworks and essays written by mother/artists. Hettie Judah’s *Acts of Creation: Art and Motherhood* (2024) charts an important lineage of maternal artists in visual art, sculpture, performance and installation. Critical discourse in other fields of performance such as dance (Aoife McGrath, *Dance and the Maternal*) is ongoing. This book seeks to further the conversation around matrescence and artistic practice, specifically focussing on contemporary performance and live art, practices that centre the body and offer representations of lived experiences through autobiographical work.

I am writing from my subject position as a white, female researcher and educator in the field of performance based in Scotland. I am a mother and have also experienced secondary infertility and pregnancy loss. I wrote a memoir about my experience of becoming a mother (Bissell 2021) where I reflected on my own

matrescence, in this book I focus on analysing the work of other mother/artists, but I acknowledge that these are read through my own lived experience of mothering. I had the privilege to undergo matrescence in the context of a country which has a national health service and which provides statutory maternity pay and some childcare provision. Unlike most mothers around the world, my experience was not adversely affected due to poverty, structural racism, access to reproductive rights and support, or discrimination. I have taught contemporary performance for fifteen years, and only when becoming a mother realised that despite teaching feminism and autobiographical performance, I have rarely included the work of mother/artists. This feminist blind spot around matrescence is not uncommon and this book seeks to address this omission of works exploring the lived experiences of mothers by taking a matricentric feminist approach emphasising that the category of mother is distinct from that of woman and that there are specific oppressions and challenges that mothers face (O'Reilly 2019).

### *Becoming/Unbecoming*

*Matrescence and Performance: Becoming/Unbecoming* entangles critical conceptualisations of *becoming* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Braidotti 2011, 2013; and Ahmed 2017) alongside ideas of *unbecoming* (Halberstam 2011; Bunch 2013; and Putnam 2022) to provide an intersectional feminist analysis to consider contemporary artists' depictions of matrescence. Each chapter takes a theory historically related to the maternal and re-imagines this through a feminist lens drawing on examples from the field of performance. By looking at works in relation to one another, the chapters become sites of comparison, contrast and conversation between the artworks and artists to demonstrate that there are many versions of matrescence, and that contemporary performance can provide a platform where experiences of becoming a mother that remain underexamined can be presented.

In becoming a mother there is also a sense of unbecoming, of the 'irreplaceable clarity of the borders of the self' (Baraitser 2009: 49) being blurred or eroded. Baraitser argues that motherhood can be a destabilising experience but that it can also be generative stating: 'We must surely contend with the notion that motherhood produces something new' (2009: 7). Through exploring historical concepts in relation to contemporary performance practice, the theories that have depicted matrescence and birthing bodies as *unbecoming* can themselves be seen anew and evolve through feminist usage and praxis. As a performance researcher, my desire is to witness performance works live, but in order to expand the scope of performance, both geographically and temporally, I have also worked from performance documentation, play texts and a range of other written and visual sources.

The curation of works includes (mostly) performances from the last decade within a UK, European, North American and Canadian context created by artists with a range of cultural backgrounds and experiences. Some are well-known and established artists whose works have been discussed at length, others emerging artists, and all of the works have been presented in professional contexts. Making visible the work of mother/artists and particularly using case studies of lesser-known or emerging artists is part of the aim of this project, in accordance with feminism's ambition to 'lift each other up' (Ahmed 2017).

### *Feminisms*

In this book I argue that the creative work of artists representing matrescence performs a feminist praxis, adhering to Ahmed's claim that '[f]eminism is at stake in how we generate knowledge; in how we write, in who we cite' (2017: 14). To move forward we have to look back, to try to understand where the myths of motherhood originated, how the foundations were laid for the 'institution of motherhood' (Rich 1976) and how experiences of mothering are currently depicted in the most live and corporeal of art forms – performance. Elin Diamond offers what she sees as vital questions in feminist theory juxtaposed with the oldest and most relevant questions of theatrical representation: 'Who is speaking and who is listening? Whose body is in view and whose is not? What is being represented, how, and with what effects? Who or what is in control?' (1997: ii). This book considers these questions in relation to matrescence in performance acknowledging the lack of representation of the lived experiences of mothers throughout art and culture which is now being addressed.

This study explores areas of critical discourse that have been historically used to disparage or undermine female bodies – bodies which birth. The uncanny, abject, grotesque, monstrous and hybrid have been used throughout art history to render female bodies and their functions repulsive. Elkin argues that femininity has been perceived as 'a kind of abject' but notes that 'the abject is of limited help in understanding the turn to embodiment, or the role of embodiment, in feminist work' (2023: 47). The fact that the female body has played a role as 'a placeholder for that disgust' (Elkin 2023: 47) has been used by feminist artists to reject this patriarchal positioning and to reclaim the abject, but Elkin warns of the problems with of this approach:

[I]t takes the body and repulsion as universal ahistorical concepts when in fact they are anything but. By thinking about bodily repulsion in this way, we avoid having to look at or think about particular bodies – least of all our own.

(2023: 47)

When considering how useful theories of the uncanny, abject, grotesque, monstrous and hybrid are for feminisms, it is important to heed Elkin's acknowledgement that these are not ahistorical concepts, nor indeed universal, and that they are rooted in oppression. Elkin notes that theories of the abject do not begin to capture how women *themselves* feel about their bodies from the inside and asks: 'Which is not to say we are not often disgusted by our bodies. But to what degree is disgust innate, or learned?' (Elkin 2023: 48). If female bodies have been rendered uncanny, abject, grotesque, monstrous and hybrid, how can these concepts rooted in oppression become empowering and feminist tools? Or can they? Feminist artists working in visual art, film, installation, performance and live art have found ways of subverting how these concepts are understood and read, but these are complex and contested ideas, entrenched in Europatriarchal systems of knowledge and value.

Audre Lorde warns that the 'master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (1984: 110–3) and for some BIPOC artists and theorists, dominant theories formed out of Europatriarchal historical ideologies that do not relate to individual's lived experiences do not speak to them (Claibourne 1996: 33). *Reclaiming* these concepts and visual languages as political and artistic tools is not desirable or relevant for all individuals and communities. Throughout this book, I wrestle with how to *re-write* myths of motherhood, and importantly, to analyse which mothers' stories have been represented through performance and whose remain unseen or deemed *unstageable*. This is not only through determining which mother's stories have been told, but to consider when matrescence begins and ends and who gets to claim the term *matrescence* at all. The final chapter explores experiences of loss, grief, choice and infertility, and expands the key concept of matrescence (becoming a mother) to include those who may feel like they are mothers but have not had the opportunity or circumstance to mother their own biological child.

*Matrescence and Performance: Becoming/Unbecoming* is informed by Iris Marion Young's idea of the doubling of the mother, and artist and theorist Bracha L. Ettinger's concept of the matrixial, an understanding of human subjectivity in which we have never been an I (child) without a non-I (mother) (i.e. there is no self without non-I). Ettinger argues that subjectivising processes begin prior to birth, in the late intrauterine *affective* encounter between becoming-subject and becoming-mother. She theorises this encounter as one of co-emergence, co-becoming and argues that subjectivity is an affective, liminal threshold (Ettinger 2006). Elkin argues that the concept of boundary-crossing concepts such as the monstrous provides new words and methods:

[W]hich help us to move past a conception of women's storytelling that binds us doubly into shame or empowerment, loyalty or betrayal, silence or freedom, domes-

ticity or art. We don't live in these binaries, not really. And if we listen more attentively to what women are telling us, we'll find their stories don't live in them either. (2023: 32)

If we do not exist in these binaries, what can the border-defying concepts of the uncanny, abject, grotesque, monstrous and hybrid offer intersectional feminist thought and analysis? Baraitser questions the idea of transformation in the experience of matrescence, contesting the idea of transformation as a magical movement from one state to the other. She says: 'the transition to motherhood contains a certain horror; disintegration, the birth of a state of being excessive to unity ... Yet this unpleasant state also has creative potential' (Baraitser 2009: 63). By considering the power of this horror, the creative potential of celebrating these *unbecoming* aspects of matrescence, this study treads new ground in feminist analysis through readings of contemporary performance works.

### *Mothers Who Make*

When matrescence has been represented in the performing arts, what do these representations suggest? That becoming a mother always results in the birth of a healthy, non-disabled child who is then brought up by their biological parents? That mothers are white, middle-class, cis women who birthed 'naturally'? These dominant notions of what it is to become a mother are ready to be re-considered, re-contextualised and re-written. In saying this, I acknowledge that many of the case studies in this book are white women and I want to consider what some of the barriers to creating autobiographical work might be for BIPOC mothers or would-be mothers. Black British performer Aleasha Chaunte discusses this:

When you're a performer, especially if you're a solo performer, being at the centre of your work requires a real sense of self-awareness and a knowledge of how you come across; understanding of what the details are of your presence, what are people receiving when you stand in front of them. And for me, especially thinking about this from the point of view of race, is difficult because it's likely that you will be in a space where you'll still be a minority. Your audience is unlikely to be entirely made up of people who look like you.

(2021: 9)

In *Unmaking Mimesis*, Diamond cites the Black, feminist, lesbian organisation, the Combahee River Collective, who stated in 1974 that '[t]he most profound and politically most radical politics come directly out of our own identity' (1997: 106).

This may be the case, but mothers can feel isolated and judged while simultaneously experiencing the paradigm shift of matrescence and its impacts on their sense of identity. Being able to make autobiographical work in a safe, supported and resourced way is a privilege not afforded to all.

Following scholars Hortense Spillers, Patricia Hill Collins, Christina Sharpe, and a number of other Black feminist theorists, and writing in the context of the United States, Henry Washington Jr explores Black mothers' performances of maternal remembrances after their children have been killed offering a way of thinking through 'the regimes of being and knowing that exclude Black mothers from the discursive category of maternity' (2020: 142). Washington Jr argues that through public performances of their grief, Black mothers insist on mothering despite being 'stripped of their maternity' through the 'state-sanctioned' deaths of their children (2020: 143). For Washington Jr, the ongoing subjugation of Black life beyond the historical event of racial enslavement 'continues to constrain Black mothers' access to the sociolegal rights and privileges that constitute maternity's meaning' (2020: 145). The erasure of Black matrescence is also evident in a 2003 US study of depictions of motherhood in magazines. While Black women featured in some visual representations of employed women, there were no representations of Black mothers. Johnston and Swanson comment: 'In advertisements, Women of Color are represented in employment contexts, but in the realm of motherhood they disappear' (2003: 29).<sup>3</sup>

I use Collins' (2015) definition of intersectionality as the understanding that social inequalities are interdependent and indivisible from one another, but heed Ashlee Christoffersen and Akwugo Emejulu's warnings about how 'intersectional' feminism can be based on the assumption that feminism is white (2022). In 'Under western eyes, feminist scholarship and colonial discourse' (1984), Chandra Talpade Mohanty cautions that 'knowledge' about women in the third world 'take as their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the U.S. and Western Europe' (333).<sup>4</sup> This book discusses some of the feminist issues experienced in relation to matrescence in the United Kingdom, Europe, North America and Canada (maternal health and mortality, reproductive rights and healthcare support, maternal health/mental health, maternity pay) but acknowledges the disparity in experiences of mothers across the world in terms of geographical location and cultural context. Many other feminist issues proliferate across the globe including access to education, gender-based violence (including intimate partner violence), child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), legal access to rights around marriage and divorce and reproductive justice. There has been a critical analysis of rejection of the role of motherhood in scholarship in India (Bhambhani, Chandni and Anand Inbanathan 2018) and Mohanty's warning to feminist scholars working in countries with white Europatriarchal lineages is an important

one; that homogenising individual experiences of class, race, religious, cultural and historical specificities of the lives of women in the Global South conflates these and ‘can create a false sense of the commonality of oppressions, interests and struggles between and amongst women globally. Beyond sisterhood there is still racism, colonialism and imperialism!’ (1984: 348). The institution of motherhood (Rich 1976) does not appear in the same guise globally, but expectations of mothers persist in many disparate cultures.

### *Performance*

In this book, I use the term ‘performance’ to refer mostly to works that sit in the genre of contemporary performance and live art. The majority of the works I include were performed in front of live audiences, but there are exceptions, particularly works created during the COVID-19 pandemic when live artists moved to work with digital technologies and other media (Bissell and Weir 2021; Bissell 2023). Visual art, installation and fine art examples are also used to acknowledge the lineage and context of works exploring matrescence and experiences of motherhood to date. There are also some examples of contemporary devised theatre, but the majority of the performances I focus on are autobiographical or semi-autobiographical created by mother/artists working in the context of the United Kingdom, Europe North America and Canada.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary performance frequently draws on conventions from theatre, but avoids artifice, with close proximity to the real. Deirdre Heddon claims:

The relationship between marginalised subjects and the appeal of autobiographical performance is not co-incidental. Autobiographical performances can capitalise on theatre’s unique temporality, its here and nowness, and on its ability to respond to and engage with the present, while always keeping an eye on the future.

(2008: 2)

The mother/artists discussed in this book use their autobiographies with a range of abstractions (auto-fiction, personal reflection, autobiography/autoethnography) and in various mediums (contemporary performance, dance, live art) to convey their experience of matrescence. Some are framed as autobiographical and for others it is implied, and the analysis of the works is my own. I use the term mother/artist frequently throughout this book though note that not all of the examples explore human biological mothering; Chapter 6, for example, considers maternal practices beyond species boundaries.

In *The Story of Art Without Men* (2022), Katy Hessel suggests that in the 1970s the most significant method of igniting change was ‘through the nature of

art-making itself' (2022: 332) and that 'although there was no singular aesthetic for feminist art, many chose to work with the body, or with other corporeal symbols' (2022: 333). This shift to addressing subjects of 'motherhood, violence, migration and race' (Hessel 2022: 332) through protest or performance, feminist artists were able to make visible their experiences of being a woman in a society dominated by repressive patriarchal structures and systems. Using images of vaginas, labia and phalluses (Judy Chicago, Yayoi Kusama, Hanna Wilke), rape reports (Suzanne Lacy, *Three Weeks in May* and *In Mourning and in Rage* with Leslie Labowitz, Ana Mendieta's *Untitled [Rape Scene]*) as well as their own naked bodies (Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*), women artists literally embodied their feminist enquiries around their own representation and how they were both subject and object within the work. While these works did not explicitly explore matrescence in the way that Mierle Laderman Ukeles *Maintenance Art* (1969) or Mary Kelly *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79) did, they mark an important shift in the way artists were using their own bodies and performance as a medium, a fact which led to the works often being read as provocative or controversial (or simply 'not art'). Jennifer Doyle argues that the scandal of artworks fades over time and, as the cultural and artistic context evolves, previously upsetting works become 'relatively harmless' (2013: 45). Artworks that are deemed as shocking or difficult can open up a channel for discussion and lead to greater representation of images that have previously been undepicted. In analysing these *unbecoming* performances of matrescence in this book, my aim is to expand understandings of how becoming a mother can be experienced and staged.

### Becoming/Unbecoming *Chapters*

Each chapter focuses on a concept related to matrescence with examples of contemporary performance. Some of these ideas are entangled, and throughout this study, these concepts leak out of their confines and into each other.

Chapter 1 sets up some of the myths of motherhood that the mother/artists included in this volume seek to dismantle. Ideas of the 'good' and 'bad' mother (Klein 1935), or 'good enough' mother (Winnicott 1953;), are situated alongside concepts of maternal ambivalence (Klein 1935; Hollway and Featherstone 2002). If the expectation of becoming a mother is idealised and rendered in an unrealistic way, then those for whom matrescence is also (inevitably) an unbecoming is highly impactful. This chapter discusses performances which use sound, image, music and myth to explore complex and ambivalent experiences of matrescence. Bryony Kimming's solo performance *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch* (2019) and Company of Wolves' *Unbecoming* (2023) are discussed in relation to conventional myths of

motherhood. Drawing on Greek myth and fairy tales via Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), this chapter explores the mythologies of matrescence and how maternal ambivalence and traumatic experiences of motherhood are staged to attempt a re-writing of dominant myths.

Chapter 2 explores how depictions of matrescence in performance evoke the uncanny, a concept first discussed by Ernst Jentsch in 1906 and then developed by Freud in 1919. Avital Ronell, in *The Telephone Book*, writes of Freud's notion of *das unheimliche* that: 'The more dreadfully disquieting thing is not the other or an alien; it is, rather, yourself in oldest familiarity with the other, for example, it could be the Double in which you recognize yourself outside of yourself' (Ronell 1989: 69). Exploring Freud's association between the maternal body and the uncanny, as well as feminist critiques of these connections, this chapter situates the doubling of the uncanny alongside Iris Marion Young's theory on the doubling of the pregnant subject. Drawing on Causey's contention that technology further evokes the uncanny through multiple doubles and splices, this chapter initially explicates the link between matrescence and the uncanny through analysis of performance works with digital elements. Hannah Ballou's *GOO:GA* (2021) and EL Putnam's *All Kinds of Disintegration* (2020) explore doubling and splitting respectively to expand maternal subjectivities into the unfamiliar and strange. Finally, choreographer Julienne Doko's *W.O.M.B (Worth of My Body)* (2022) does not use digital technology, instead, the uncanny is evoked live in the performance space with gold breastplates duetting with the live performers to convey the bodily traces of matrescence which are left behind.

The performances created by mother/artists examined in Chapter 3 attempt (in various ways) to use mimesis to re-write the patriarchal, neoliberal political narratives of motherhood via mimetic doublings, parodies and re-enactments. The analysis of these performances as feminist expands on Diamond's discussion of mimesis in which she moves away from ideas of imitation and an authentic relationship between the 'real' version and its mimos, instead emphasising the political potential of mimesis to question the truth in restaging the 'same'. Through analysis of Jodie Hawkes' re-enactments of Kate Middleton's matrescence (*Playing Kate*, 2017–19) and 21Common's *The Ballad of the Apathetic Son and His Narcissistic Mother* (2017), I argue that there *is* such a thing as feminist mimesis and through parodic, perversions of the culturally normative expectations of motherhood, performances created by mother/artists act as a way of challenging political hegemony through heightened, excessive and feminist means.

Providing sustenance for your child is one of the key preoccupations of parents and thus Chapter 4 focuses on a range of works that explore feeding. Using Kristeva's concept of abjection to explore lactation, as well as intersectional feminist critique of this, this chapter considers multiple ways of providing sustenance

explored through performance by those who breast/chest-feed, bottle feed or use milk donation. Drawing on Astrida Neimanis's analysis of how the intercorporeal flows of breast milk are a matter of privilege and racialised reproductive politics (2017), discussion of Lynn Lu's *on mother's milk and kisses fed* (2013), Angela Beallor with Michelle Temple and Elizabeth Press (EP)'s *A Drawing Out: Lactic Orchestration* (2019), Sarah Sudhoff's *Supply and Demand* (2013), Anguezomo Nzé Mba Bikoro's *Pieta: The Hammer, Mother & Child* (2013), Patty Chang's *Milk Debt* (2021) and Jess Dobkins' *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* (2006, 2012, 2016) and *For What It's Worth* (2023) explore the relational, social, physical and durational elements of providing sustenance.

While the domestic and the grotesque might seem distinct, they share a meeting point via mess, disorder and chaos. Chapter 5 acknowledges the way in which the leaky, porous, deviant and defiant elements of the grotesque permeate the domestic space. This chapter opens with Nicola ZaucedoMata's maternal body rendered grotesque through textile sculptures of limbs which she wears in *Study No. 2 of Cicadas That Do Not Fall Silent* (2024). Performances inspired by domestic experiences related to matrescence are introduced, such as Bobby Baker's *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988), as well as works performed in kitchens (Grace Surman's *I Love My Baby and My Baby Loves Me* [2010], and Katherine Nolan's *Domestic Flesh* [2021]). By juxtaposing these concepts which have historically been associated with mothers, this chapter seeks to consider the kitchen as a political domestic site for performances which enact a matricentric feminism through the grotesque.

The performances I discuss in Chapter 6 depart further from ideas of the maternal as a human biological process, instead considering other birthings and maternal acts that occur between species. Kira O'Reilly's performances with pigs developed in response to her experiences of using pig bodies within scientific research environments at the SymbioticA laboratory, an artistic research lab at the University of Western Australia's School of Anatomy and Human Biology, between 2004 and 2005. She subsequently devised a duet with a pig body in the performance *inthewrongplaceness* (2005) which was followed by a performance of co-habitation: *Falling Asleep With a Pig* (2009). Maja Smrekar's *Hybrid Family* (2016) was created over a three-month period of seclusion with her dogs, where she stimulated her pituitary glands with systemic breast pumping in order to be able to breastfeed her puppy Ada. In doing this she aimed to explore what she characterises as her 'decolonial reproductive freedom in a dangerously multi-species world' (Haraway 2016) and *Extended Hybrid Family* (2019) further interrogated what it is to be 'companion species' (Haraway 2003). Drawing on feminist animal studies and ecofeminism, this chapter asks what performance can offer in representing and expanding understandings of matrescence beyond species boundaries.

The final chapter evokes artworks conveying maternal experiences beyond what are considered as traditional or conventional motherhoods, including those which do not result in the birth of a child. People who have experienced pregnancy loss, stillbirth, infertility or abortion experience a distinct form of matrescence as do those who perform maternal care and feel maternal love towards one who is not a biological child (via adoption, fostering and alternative family structures for example). This chapter queries at what point does one *become* a mother. Heeding Haraway's provocation to 'make kin, not babies' (2016) in the face of climate crisis, some artists are making the decision to not bring a child into the world despite the desire to be a mother and grieving the loss of an experience of pregnancy or motherhood. Entangling ecological and new materialist theory alongside analysis of contemporary performances which explore loss, grief and expanded forms of matrescence, this chapter considers common yet invisible forms of matrescence that have not yet been fully critically analysed in discussions of maternal art and performance.

### *Performing Matrescence*

Acknowledging the lineage of mothers who have sought to make visible their maternal labor and experiences through artistic practice this book asks what the medium of performance can do to expand representations, iterations and understandings of matrescence. Through analysis of contemporary artworks, I build on feminist scholarship on maternal performance to consider how matrescence can be seen as an evolving and lifelong enquiry for performance making. This study questions whose matrescence has been made visible and explores alternative maternal practices from LGBTQIA+ matrescence and queer families, multi-species maternal practices and considers specific intersections of *myths* of motherhood which affect BIPOC mothers. It also invites an expansion of who gets to *become a mother*, troubles when this process might begin and argues for the importance of including experiences of loss, grief and choice (and lack of choice) in discussions of maternal performance.

Perhaps inviting a revision of these conceptual areas of the uncanny, abject, grotesque, monstrous and hybrid is where the political potential of these works lies: in staging their experiences of matrescence mother/artists are able to enact an alienation, and in rendering the familiar unfamiliar, ultimately invite questioning of what images of maternal experience *are* familiar. As Kokoli suggests in her book on the uncanny in art, these strategies

involve a process of defamiliarisation, namely of uncovering the strangeness of what is assumed to be known, established or ordinary, which is tinged with an indictment

of the division between the familiar and unfamiliar in the first place. A division that is viewed as intrinsically hierarchical and imbued in the politics of power.

(2016: 2)

Familiar myths of motherhood are seen anew and rendered questionable by these alternative, sometimes messy, and rarely witnessed experiences of matrescence. This book explores how contemporary performance can expose, as James articulates in her 2006 work, the lies and myths of matrescence, while also expanding whose truths are deemed as representable and stageable. *Becomings* are simultaneously *unbecomings* and in acknowledging this, the known can become unknown, the cracks for new understandings of what it is to *perform matrescence* are revealed.

## NOTES

1. James' work has been presented at: Birkbeck Cinema (2023); Tate Britain (2023); Gagosian (2023); T. J. Boulting (2022); South London Gallery (2022) and Goldsmiths CCA (2022). She has also shown at Art Exchange, Colchester (2023); Focal Point Gallery, Southend (2022) and RadicalxChange Conference, New York (2020).
2. In Chapter 6, I discuss a wider range of maternal practices in the context of artworks that include other species.
3. In Johston and Swanson's 2003 study, five magazines were selected for analysis to represent the highest subscription traditional women's magazines in the United States, the highest subscription parenting magazines and the magazines with the highest composition of employed mothers. The entire content of each publication was analysed for mother representations.
4. Mohanty uses the term 'third world', Global South is the preferred term today.
5. It should be noted that while the majority of the works I discuss are autobiographical, some are more in the realm of theatre. In these instances, the work has been made with an expert partner in order to represent stories of lived experiences.

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