



HDK-VALAND – ACADEMY OF ART AND DESIGN

UNVEILING THE EMBODIED MULTIPLICITIES OF MOTHERING

AN AUTOTHEORETICAL ENQUIRY

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of mothering plays a distinctive and multifaceted role in our contemporary social context, characterized by the rapid evolution of gender roles, shifting cultural dynamics, and complex economic structures. This autotheoretical enquiry embarks on a thorough exploration of the complexities inherent in mothering, using embodiment as a methodological framework. As a result of this enquiry context and alignment with autotheory, I have come to formulate the research question for this enquiry as: *Can autotheory be an artistic method to unveil the multiplicities of embodiment within the experience of mothering?*

The font used in some paragraphs, Almendras Display, serves as a catalyst for the autotheoretical. Though unassuming in appearance with its classic, almost invisible hue, it carries a profound importance, much like the essence of motherhood itself. Feminist designer, Ana Sanfelippo created this font, for the Feminist Culture House Project, and it serves as an artistic device to theoretically document the investigation of the often-invisible sides of motherhood and mothering.¹ For me, its unobtrusive presence mirrors the quiet strength and significance of mothering in our lives and it allows me to question my theoretical arguments through artistic practice.

¹ “Badass Libre Fonts”, Womxn Feminist Culture House, accessed October 27, 2023, <https://feministculturehouse.org/publishing/feminist-fonts/>.

Embodiment in the context of mothering, as I see it, refers to the idea that one's experiences, identity, and roles as a mother and as a parent are deeply grounded in physical material processes. It encompasses the understanding that the experience of mothering is not solely a social or psychological construct but is fundamentally grounded in the physical embodiment of being a parent.

Using the methodological framework of embodiment, the main aim of this essay is to look closely at motherhood in order to change current conversations so that they embed the many and varied aspects of parents' experiences, identities, and roles in contemporary society. The practices of artists, writers, and other professionals in the arts and culture who transition between the fields of contemporary art, literature, and academia, as well as between practice and research, writing and studio art, self-reflection and philosophical study, are best described by autotheory as curator and writer Lauren Fournier defines it².

By using autotheory as a method, I want to show the multiplicities of mothering, which are "more than one, more than two, but less than infinity," as critic Eve Sedgwick³ defines it. This will help me see the variety of motherly experiences that go beyond societal binary limits and challenge stereotype ideas of them. As an artist, I am working with autotheory with the intention of using my own experiences to give voice to the exploration of motherhood's many facets and to give mothering artistic space to question it through my artistic practice.

How can there be a plurality of meaningful experiences while it is just me writing about them, in this enquiry?

Recognizing the inherent paradox of presenting a plurality of meaningful experiences through a single perspective, this enquiry grapples with the challenge of capturing the diverse nuances of motherhood within the confines of a single author's narrative, inviting reflection on the

² Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as feminist practice in art, writing and criticism*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021), 8.

³ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, (Minnesota: The Graywolf Press, 2015), 62. Maggie Nelson quotes Eve Sedgwick but I was unable to locate the exact quote from Sedgwick.

tension between the personal and the collective in the exploration of these complex and multifaceted maternal experiences.

Through this enquiry, I plan to reveal the multiplicity of mothering through embodiment by arguing that conventional binary constraints, rooted in traditional gender roles and contemporary societal expectations, restrict our understanding of maternal experiences and identities, of motherhood and mothering. These constraints impose narrow, rigid expectations on individuals, particularly on women, defining their roles and behaviors based on these traditional norms.

Autotheory emerges as a powerful canvas for this unveiling, as it provides the means for a critical scrutiny of these constraints. It acts as an artistic stage for questioning and surpassing these limitations, ultimately seeking to illuminate the irrationality of societal expectations surrounding motherhood and mothering.

Mothering (UK 'mʌð.ər.ɪŋ/ US /'mʌð.ər.ɪŋ/)

noun

*the process of caring for children as their mother or of caring for people in the way that a mother does*⁴

I am using mothering as a verb, as the action that brings me fulfillment and at the same time burnout. Mothering is a form of embodiment for the love and care that I have to the people that I mother.

The distinction between becoming a mother and the act of mothering is profound. Becoming a mother is often, but not exclusively, linked to a biological process, while the practice of mothering transcends the confines of biology. I will provide a structured exploration of various theoretical instances of mothering, that illustrate the concept of embodiment in mothering. For example, the first experience of embodiment we all encounter during our

⁴ “Mothering”, Cambridge Dictionary, accessed October 14, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/mothering> .

lifetime is the experience of being mothered. Whether by our own biological mother or by a caretaker (for example: orphans) the process of caring has the same name: mothering.

You, reader, are alive today because someone once mothered you.

Given the complexity of “motherhood” and “mothering”, I've chosen to structure this essay around the framework of embodiment. Within this structure, I'll explore how the embodied multiplicities of mothering and motherhood are unveiled through the lenses of gender and social expectations, applying theories and analyzing case studies. Reflections at the end will follow this exploration.

This enquiry serves as a space for the exploration of the intricate relationship between motherhood, mothering and embodiment. It's important to note that while I don't assert to have an overarching understanding of the topic, I consider this essay a platform for learning and growth. The topic is very vast, so I do not claim I can cover all facets in this enquiry, therefore it is critical to state that it is an ongoing exploration of the topic, and that is why much of the autotheoretical functions are questions, that I will work with in my artistic practice.

MOTHERING THROUGH GENDER LENSES

Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler, states that gender is an amalgamation of cultural norms, historical formation, family influences, psychic realities, desires, and wishes.⁵ Gender as performative means that gender produces a series of effects, an engagement in roles intrinsic to the gender we enact within society, with profound and far-reaching implications towards the person and society.⁶

“Performative” as a word was first coined by the philosopher J.L. Austin, who was trying to understand legal utterances, so when a judge says, “I declare you man and wife” you become man and wife because the declaration has happened. Just as a legal utterance (like a judge declaring a marriage) has real-world consequences, the performance of gender also has real consequences in shaping our experiences and the world around us.⁷

Through *enactment*, we embody an experience of gender. By appearing, speaking, and acting in certain ways, reality changes, so an act of embodiment has real consequences for the reality around us. Gender is culturally formed, but it is also a domain of agency or freedom, and it is important to resist the violence that is imposed by ideal gender norms, especially

⁵ Judith Butler, “Berkeley professor explains gender theory | Judith Butler” YouTube, June 8, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UD9IOIUR4k>.

⁶ Judith Butler, “Berkeley professor explains gender theory | Judith Butler”.

⁷ Judith Butler, “Berkeley professor explains gender theory | Judith Butler”.

against those who are nonconforming in their gender representation, linking back to the argument and the traditional gender roles.⁸

Writer Maggie Nelson's discourse on performativity, particularly the repetitive enactment of oppressive gender norms, provides an in-depth understanding of the intricate choreography required to redefine and resignify these norms.⁹ She emphasizes that these norms are entrenched through repeating acts which affects societal expectations and individual conduct.¹⁰ Furthermore, mirroring the core argument, Nelson's research shows how hard it is to go against and subvert established rules, focusing on the complex coordination and work needed to redefine and resignify them.¹¹

The assertion by French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir that "a woman is not born but becomes one" resonates with the recognition that the body, once considered an immutable fact, undergoes transformation.¹² Motherhood, historically bound to the presumption of heteronormativity, now unfurls its possibilities as an open-ended enquiry. The feminist definition that women are fundamentally mothers and that maternity is the essence of feminism was presumptively heterosexual, a conventional binary constraint, one of the ones mentioned in the argument of this enquiry.¹³

Why do we need to become mothers? Is it our own desires or societal pressure?

In the advocacy for women's rights and recognizing the significance of motherhood, it was done so with the implicit assumption that women's experiences revolved around heterosexual relationships and traditional family structures. This perspective doesn't adequately address the experiences of women who do not conform to these assumptions, such as lesbian couples, single mothers, or those with non-traditional family arrangements. Feminism has different emphases that are present at different times encompassing a broader and more inclusive understanding of women's experiences and identities, acknowledging the diversity of

⁸ Judith Butler, "Berkeley professor explains gender theory | Judith Butler".

⁹ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 15.

¹⁰ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 16.

¹¹ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 16.

¹² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (London: The Lowe and Bridon , 1953), 285.

¹³ Judith Butler, "Berkeley professor explains gender theory | Judith Butler".

motherhood experiences beyond the presumptively heterosexual framework.¹⁴ This nuanced perspective aligns with the overarching argument of the enquiry, which seeks to explore the multiplicities of motherhood and mothering, transcending binary constraints and challenging stereotypical notions within the artistic realm.

I never felt more ashamed of being a mother than when I was labeled a single mother. That label came with a lot of prejudice about my abilities, capabilities and understanding. I was either trying to steal husbands, either unable to provide for my child or simply a lesser person than the ones married happily every after. None of these labels reflected my reality, yet no one cared.

Philosopher Sara Ruddick argues that “maternal” is a social category, and although maternal thinking arises from actual child-bearing care practices, biological parenting is neither necessary nor sufficient.¹⁵ This perspective challenges traditional notions of motherhood and maternal roles by emphasizing that being “maternal” isn't solely determined by biological parenting. She underscores the idea that maternal thinking, which encompasses the cognitive and emotional aspects of caregiving as an embodiment of practice, can extend beyond biological motherhood and includes individuals, who engage in nurturing and caregiving roles, whether or not they are biologically related to the child.

This view acknowledges the broader impact of caregiving practices and maternal thinking on society, transcending the confines of traditional family structures. In essence, Ruddick's argument underscores the significance of caregiving itself, irrespective of biological connections, in shaping what we consider maternal, rejecting the binary constraints that see the biological connection as the status quo of what is considered maternal, echoing the core argument of this enquiry.

If motherhood is not mandatory and connected to biological fact, what does it actually mean? Caregiving?

¹⁴ Silvia Federici, “They call it love, we call it unpaid labor”, YouTube, July 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFSI4nEB6jI>.

¹⁵ Sara Ruddick, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Maryland: The Summer, 1980), 346.

Having biological children is the *root* of mothering, but not the sole facet of it. As writer Maggie Nelson delves into the depths of motherhood, she tells of her encounter with the private, yet compelling act of pumping milk, a silent endeavor for many. This action can be both physically and emotionally taxing, reminding her that she is, another mammal, her milk extracted as if from a sacred source.¹⁶ Within the process of pumping, images are strikingly absent, except for pictures in breast pump manuals. Phrases like "colostrum", "letdown", and "hindmilk" emerge like "cryptic hieroglyphs from some long-lost civilization".¹⁷

Breastfeeding is an amazing superpower to grow food for another body. Nonetheless it is an abuse to the body.

In this exploration, there's a capaciousness to be explored – a baby, in its creation, magically "makes space" within the mother's body, where there was none before. The very bones of the ribcage shift to accommodate this new life, internal organs realign, and even the humble navel pops inside out, revealing its finite depth. Maggie Nelson continues her exploration of motherhood through the lens of gendered bodies. In the process of creating a male body, her body underwent a transformation where the distinctions between male and female bodies seemed to dissolve further. The key differentiation lies in the fact that the body she was shaping would eventually separate from her own and become an independent entity.¹⁸

This transformation in her body challenges and blurs the traditional boundaries and distinctions between male and female bodies. By doing so, she exemplifies how motherhood rejects binary constraints but rather exists in a fluid and evolving state, and that mothering is not just giving birth; it also includes the deep experiences of breastfeeding, the physical changes that mothers go through, and that gender roles do not matter when it comes to shaping a man's body, mirroring the core argument of this essay.

¹⁶ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 99-103.

¹⁷ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 102.

¹⁸ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 87.

Some might mother as a stepparent, and no matter their qualities or efforts, as a stereotype, they are prone to resentment and hate, facing challenges without cultural recognition but persisting in fostering a positive environment amidst adversity.

“And do not expect to get any kudos from the culture, either: parents are Hallmark-sacrosanct, but stepparents are interlopers, self-servers, poachers, pollutants and child molesters”.¹⁹

In the context of the essay's argument, this quote exemplifies how societal expectations and stereotypes can create binary distinctions between different parenting roles, different embodiments of mothering, limiting our understanding of the diverse experiences within motherhood and family dynamics. It is possible that mothering relies less on biological factors and more on the emotional and psychological connections that form between a caretaker and a child.

The process of transitioning from biological mothering to just mothering results in a transformation of the relationship, leading to a shift towards a caregiving dynamic. The concept of motherhood, regardless of its biological or non-biological nature, entails a multitude of obligations, commitments, and societal expectations, and in the case of a lack of the biological process, the mothering is not usually acknowledged to the extent that it merits.

I acknowledge that I draw from my personal experiences, trying to avoid broad generalizations, by the potential privilege inherent in my experiences as a white woman, who has mothered children, siblings, parents, grandparents as a married and single mother, compared to other women who may have had more challenging experiences.

Certainly, in the context of exploring the embodied multiplicities of mothering through the lens of gender, Catherine Opie's "Domestic series" provides an insightful practice case study.²⁰

¹⁹ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 21.

²⁰ Catherine Opie, *365 DAYS OF LESBIANS*, June 30, 2021, <https://365daysoflesbians.tumblr.com/post/655451084036423680/catherine-opie-from-domestic-series-1995-1998>.

Opie's "Domestic series" explores the multiple gender roles present in household environments, while also capturing the embodiment of mothering itself. The artistic endeavors encompass a comprehensive portrayal of mothering embracing both the physical and emotional dimensions. Her works include depictions of mothers engaged in their quotidian rituals, nurturing and tending to their offspring, as well as instances of close connection. The artistic portrayal of mothering, viewed through the framework of embodiment, provides a deep insight into the intricate dynamics between gender, identity, and the actualized encounters of mothers. It does this by presenting a critique of conventional gender standards and through offering insight into the intimate and physical aspects of maternal responsibilities. This contributes to a wider exploration of the intricate dynamics within the realms of motherhood and gender.

Does an artist need to go to extreme physical lengths to prove a point, or do I see it as extreme because my mind is not open enough? Am I too blinded by my own cultural background as I was raised in a very "traditional" society in Romania?

Linking it to my own practice and my thoughts about it, I am finding myself inspired and challenged by her work. Her work inspires me to bridge personal and public spheres, particularly in regard to aesthetic decision making, depicting the domestic aspects of mothering. At the same time, it forces me to accept my artistic role in shifting paradigms and reframing them through my own vision. However, as I analyze her artwork, I am confronted with the complicated framework my mind has constructed, as well as the extreme perspectives it has forged, an issue that needs further development and acknowledgement. On examination, the "complex framework" in my mind alludes to highly rooted society expectations and standards about motherhood, gender roles, and art depictions. Opie's unconventional art challenges me to confront these complexities, realizing that my "extreme perspectives" have grown with time; social narratives shape these established attitudes and biases, which resist change. This revelation highlights for me the need to acknowledge and analyze these ideas, which if I fail to do so, can limit my artistic practice.

I truly believe that art offers a language when our other languages fail.

MOTHERING THROUGH SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

Feminist and Marxist scholar Silvia Federici's statement that "the marriage contract is a labor contract because we marry for love, but they call it love, we call it unpaid labor," sheds light on the institutionalization and regulation of marriage and the nuclear family by law.²¹ Further, it emphasizes the essential role of women's embodiment within these structures in the reproduction of the workforce. This statement underscores how women have historically performed unpaid domestic labor, including childcare, labor which is central to the social and economic functioning of societies.

Why did I marry three times? Am I a bird who learned to love her cage?

Federici's research delves into the complex relationships between gender, work, and capitalism. She argues that the common idea of housework as just providing for one's family does not fully understand its larger meaning.²² In fact, it embodies the "capitalist structure

²¹ Silvia Federici, *"They call it love, we call it unpaid labor"*.

²² Silvia Federici, *"They call it love, we call it unpaid labor"*.

governing the process of reproducing the labor force.”²³ Household chores encompass more than just fulfilling individual need; they constitute a crucial element in the preparation and maintenance of the workforce that propels capitalist economies. Her statements highlights how women have traditionally been in charge of the crucial task of labor reproduction, which is a vital component that benefits the capitalist class. She also highlights how binary restrictions are inextricably related to the historical and current exploitation of women's labor.

If I had a krona for every time I've heard, "You're the woman in this house, so you're responsible for cleaning," I'd be rich.

Federici points out that across generations, women have been responsible for activities essential for labor reproduction. The capacity to work, which isn't inherently natural, is continually embodied and reproduced through various forms of labor, primarily by women. This labor is indispensable for the workforce's functioning, benefiting the entire capitalist class. Capitalists don't need to create extensive infrastructure to support workers going to their jobs because women have historically served as the infrastructure for the reproduction of labor.²⁴

The housework, traditionally perceived as private and personal, is *invisible* within capitalist systems, yet it exposes the pivotal role that mothers play in sustaining this complex machinery, often at the cost of experiencing maternal burnout and depression. Federici's critique highlights the gendered and exploitative nature of this system and the need to recognize the value of domestic work within broader economic and social contexts, in alignment to the central argument of this enquiry.

Democracy assumes equality, freedom, and fairness. These ideals change over time, challenging traditional ideas of equality, freedom, and justice. As we face these problems, we must revisit and strengthen these ideas, including racial justice, gender equality, and freedom. Any democratic effort must address these concerns, especially when redefining "the people" and what it means to live freely and fearlessly. Moreover, societal culture should actively support mothers by providing enabling portrayals of maternal finitude. Unfortunately, it often

²³ Silvia Federici, "They call it love, we call it unpaid labor".

²⁴ Silvia Federici, "They call it love, we call it unpaid labor".

perpetuates the implicit belief that mothers could fulfill our desires if they truly wished to, keeping this expectation alive within us.

You are a mother, you should know.

Becoming a mother, whether biologically or not, does not bestow instant, comprehensive knowledge of the myriad of responsibilities involved. There is no magical moment when you suddenly acquire the ability to cook nutritious meals every day for at least 18 years, address emotional and psychological needs effectively, balance engagement without overstimulation or underestimation, avoid excessive screen time without becoming a helicopter parent or neglectful one, nurture independence while not being overly permissive, maintain a pesticide-free multilingual household, all while working a full-time job, managing household chores and cooking, acting as the family's chauffeur for extracurricular activities, and staying attractive and available for your partner. These demands do not materialize out of thin air, and their universality is somewhat absurd. For instance, to legally offer nutritional advice, one must complete a three-year bachelor's program in nutrition yet the knowledge needed for motherhood is seemingly expected to appear instantaneously.²⁵ The societal and cultural expectations in question are unequivocally repressive and unjust, resonating the broader argument that society conventions frequently put excessive and oppressive expectations on mothers, masking the true and different realities of motherhood.

It is imperative that contemporary society realizes the adverse consequences imposed on mothers by societal expectations and properly recognizes that the responsibility is *collectively* shared. We can ease the emotional and physical stress on mothers by breaking the cycle of silence and speaking out against these unfair norms. This will also help create a more fair and supportive system that lets them thrive and take care of their families without having to deal with these unrealistic and unfair expectations.

Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, de-personalization, and reduces personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who are working with people.²⁶

²⁵ Nutritionist Foreningen, website, accessed November 4, 2023, <https://nutritionistforeningen.se/en/about-nutritionists/#:~:text=The%20translation%20of%20a%20nutritionist,Master%20of%20Science%20in%20nutriti on.>

²⁶ Christina Maslach, *Burned-out. Human Behavior, The cost of caring. Cap. 1* (Cambridge: The Malor Books, 2003), 2.

Professional burnout can lead to considerable challenges in individuals' lives, but the repercussions of parental burnout exhibit distinct characteristics. In contrast to employment, parental responsibilities do not offer remunerated periods of leave, nor do parents have the option to transfer their caregiving duties to other individuals, as those experiencing occupational burnout can seek alternative job opportunities. This unique manifestation of burnout in the context of parenting is intrinsically linked to the core argument of this enquiry, underscoring how societal structures often fail to acknowledge the specific challenges and limitations faced by individuals in their roles as parents. According to a study published in the journal *Affective Science* (Vol. 2, 2021), parents hailing from individualistic societies, which are predominantly found in Western countries, exhibited higher levels of parental burnout compared to their counterparts from Eastern countries.²⁷

I do not need a statue; I need to be offered possibilities, alternatives, inclusion and empowerment.

American feminist writer, Audre Lorde's profound insights reveal the essence of women nurturing each other as “not pathological but redemptive” force.²⁸ Within processes of nurturing, women discover their genuine power, and it's precisely this kind of connection that the patriarchal world fears. Maternity emerges as the sole social power accessible to women solely within the confines of a patriarchal framework. She emphasizes the significance of interdependence among women as the path to freedom. This interdependence allows individuals to “be”, not merely in a passive sense but as active, creative, participants in their own lives. It's a powerful contrast between mere existence and truly living.

Furthermore, she calls attention to the societal conditioning that either disregards or amplifies differences among women. She argues that true liberation doesn't come from ignoring our distinctions but from embracing and celebrating them in a *united* community.²⁹ Unlike the traditional norms, as mentioned in the argument, that rigidly define roles and behaviors,

²⁷ American Psychological Association, “*The impact of parental burnout*”, website, accessed November 4, 2023, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/10/cover-parental-burnout>.

²⁸ Audre Lorde, *The selected works of Audre Lorde*, (New York: The Norton and Company ltd, 2020), 40.

²⁹ Lorde, *The selected works of Audre Lorde*, 41.

within the confines of a binary structure, perpetuating the very distinctions Lorde deems vital to transcend.

For those who stand outside the boundaries of society's accepted definition of women, they understand that “survival is not an academic skill”.³⁰ It involves the strength to stand alone, even when unpopular or reviled, and the ability to join forces with others labeled as outsiders, others, to shape a world where everyone can flourish. Lorde concludes with the idea that embracing differences and turning them into strengths is the path to authentic change.³¹ She famously states, “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house”.³² I understand this to mean that while these tools might provide temporary victories within the existing system, they cannot bring about true transformation. This perspective challenges only those women who still rely on the master's house as their sole source of support. In other words, this concept poses a challenge primarily to those who continue to depend solely on the existing dominant structures for their sustenance. This recognition emphasizes the critical need to instigate transformative shifts from *within* rather than relying on pre-existing structures. In this framework and at the core of the enquiry's argument, it is through embodying our different identities and experiences that we find the strength to create a new, all-encompassing framework where everyone's unique contributions are valued and celebrated, breaking free from the conventional binary constraints, restricting our understanding of maternal experiences and identities.

We interact with our mothers and mothering through a complex and contradictory relationship between power and powerlessness. My opinion is that mothers often feel powerless in many societies. Throughout history, many women have taken on the responsibility of motherhood, enduring armed conflicts, social injustices, and economic hardships under a patriarchal system. Paradoxically, despite their lack of formal authority, in my opinion mothers possess an innate power by virtue of their distinct and exceptional physical proximity to their offspring, but while children rely on their mother's substantial presence, they also witness their power wane when they encounter external authorities such as fathers, teachers, doctors, judges, landlords, and the world at large. The complex

³⁰ Lorde, *The selected works of Audre Lorde*, 40.

³¹ Lorde, *The selected works of Audre Lorde*, 41

³² Lorde, *The selected works of Audre Lorde*, 42

relationship between maternal power and powerlessness creates a milieu in maternal practices that can oppress mothers and their children.³³

To situate this thinking practically, I wish to return to “The Argonauts” by writer Maggie Nelson. She supports this idea that *invisible* work in society is embodied and articulates the effects it has on mothers. Yet at the same time, she writes about the constant pressure that exists from family and religion constrains, from her own personal experience:

“Who cares what she feels like doing? It’s her conjugal duty to get over a massive physical event that has literally rearranged her organs and stretched her parts beyond comprehension and brought her to a life-or-death portal as soon as humanly possible...But God prompted me: “are the needs” you meet for your husband and the needs he wants met?” The answer of course is NO! No less then GOD says she needs to put aside the sanity-production magazine and pillow and start fucking her husband! Get over yourself and start fucking!”³⁴

Maggie Nelson's poignant words vividly illustrate the societal expectations and pressures thrust upon mothers, underscoring the rigid, traditional norms that confine them to predefined roles and behaviors. This emphasizes the pressing need for liberation from rigid notions and constrains, as previously argued in the context of creating a united community.

Mothering does not solely imply children, and there are many facets to this endeavor that need exploring and deep analysis. Besides just discussing different types of mothering there is also the psychological dimension that needs further analysis, on how societal and cultural pressure impact the mental health of those mothering, but it is beyond the scope of what I can do in this enquiry, so I will just briefly mention other various types of mothering, linking back to the central argument that the multifaceted nature of motherhood and mothering extends beyond the immediate care of children and requires a comprehensive examination of its psychological dimensions within the societal and cultural context.

One example constitutes mothering the partner, referring to the excessive provision of care and nurture, potentially including excessive indulgence, towards one's romantic partner. Instead of engaging in a collaborative partnership, one is essentially assuming a maternal role towards them. In my opinion, this phenomenon is not restricted solely to individuals who

³³ Ruddick, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 343.

³⁴ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 110.

identify as feminine. This embodiment often reflects the unconscious shift from an equal adult-to-adult relationship to a more parental, maternal-child dynamic, where the nurturing partner may engage in behaviors of mothering.

Mothering siblings, also known under the term parentification, refers to a child who has lost their role to become a caregiver.³⁵ Mothering carries the burden of carrying, like in all the other situations but when put on a child's shoulders, it can lead to serious implications. Parentification can cause stress and trauma, producing anxiety, sadness, suicidal thoughts, social isolation, and more in children and teens. "Parentification can be a form of parental neglect or abuse, particularly in extreme cases. This can result in what's known as relational trauma. Relational trauma occurs in childhood when the bonds between parent and child are somehow disrupted or broken. This creates a state of chronic stress in which children are unable to access the support and protection they need."³⁶

I love my younger brother, but why do I feel burdened by his existence?

Some parents make their children the center of their universe, devoting their money, time, and sanity toward making them contributing members of society. But as their children grow up and begin to tend to households of their own, the dynamic between parent and child is bound to shift. While a parent's sacrifices are worthy of applause, when the balance changes and they are the ones in need of care, of mothering, opinions shift. The notion varies from culture to culture, but the question remains the same: does the embodiment of mothering that was offered to you as a helpless child coming into the world carry the burden of returning the same mothering to aging parents when they become helpless? This compelling question about the embodiment of mothering and caregiving, particularly when it comes to caring for aging parents, highlights how societal expectations and roles surrounding motherhood extend beyond the boundaries of traditional caregiving, emphasizing the need to explore the multidimensional aspects of motherhood and caregiving experiences.

³⁵ Amber Felton, What is parentification, October 10, 2022, <https://www.webmd.com/parenting/what-is-parentification>.

³⁶ New Port Academy, What Is Parentification? Signs of a Parentified Child, December 20, 2022, <https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/mental-health/parentification/>.

I had my first burnout when I mothered my own children alongside my dying grandmother.

Mothering one's inner child is a profound act of self-care that addresses the love and protection one might have missed during one's own upbringing. Childhood significantly shapes adult behavior, and any deficiencies in care, protection, or affection during this formative period can reverberate through adulthood, influencing decision-making and one's approach to nurturing others.³⁷ Mothering one's inner child serves as a path for navigating mothering wounds, ultimately leading to healing and a more compassionate self.³⁸ This practice of mothering one's inner child is intimately woven into the broader argument in the context of this enquiry, highlighting the embodied aspect of mothering and the interconnectedness between personal history and current caregiving experiences. It emphasizes how the research of motherhood and mothering extends beyond outward caregiving to include interior, self-reflective components, contributing to a comprehensive knowledge of the multiplicities of mothering experiences.

This should come first, in my view, before any other type of mothering, but little do we know in our quest for mothering.

Maggie Nelson's book serves as a compelling case study for understanding the embodiment of mothering in the context of societal and cultural expectations. Nelson invokes the term "many-gendered mothers of my heart" to describe the diverse maternal figures she references in her work³⁹. This description challenges the conventional notion of mothering, separating the maternal role from its traditional associations with cisgender women. While the collaborative potential of feminist theory is viewed as utopian, Nelson candidly acknowledges her personal resistance to the idea of "merging" multiple authorial voices. Consequently, she continues to write as a singular author, weaving others' narratives into her

³⁷ BMC Health, Effects of positive and negative childhood experiences on adult family health, April 5, 2021, <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-021-10732-w>.

³⁸ Britt Stonerock, Mothering Your Inner Child: Navigating Mother Wounds, May 6, 2018, <https://indianapolismoms.com/parenting-perspectives/mothering-inner-child-navigating-mother-wounds/>.

³⁹ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 151.

own. Her honesty about the struggle to relinquish her individuality and return to autotheory, grounded both in her experiences and those of the theorists, poets, and lovers she cites, is inspiring to my practice as I, myself, struggle with ethical questions concerning writing and art, particularly regarding the ownership of narratives. It prompts me to consider, what are the boundaries of one's narrative, and are those boundaries respected? In a world where "my truth" and "your truth" coexist, the fundamental nature of truth becomes a question, forcing us to evaluate whose truth has the final say.⁴⁰ I believe that my truth can ground my theoretical insight in the practices and insights of everyday life, connecting these with rigorous processes of examination, putting the first-person testimony forward as something that can be scrutinised and which can inform better the theory; something that should not be dismissed as "irrational" or "unscientific", but rather which can produce better insight than supposedly "objective" theorisation. Furthermore, this introspection underscores the importance of my argument, exploring the complex and interwoven narratives of motherhood, through the employment of autotheory as a method to transcend conventional binary constraints and challenge societal expectations.

"I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth".⁴¹

Interdisciplinary artist and curator Dyana Gravina's works, particularly the project "Oxytocin Mothering the World", stand as a captivating case study to demonstrate this. Gravina adeptly combines personal narratives with collective wisdom to challenge conventional notions of self within societal and cultural contexts, ushering in a redefinition of the monolithic concepts of "female", "mother" and "mothering".

"Oxytocin Mothering the World" is an interdisciplinary project that explores motherhood and mothering through a unique blend of live art performances, discussion panels, and workshops, creating a platform for critical art practices, intersectional feminism, and maternity services.⁴² The project's goal is to make a community-driven art, health, and care program to test how culturally aware primary care providers, managers, and staff in maternity and health services are.

⁴⁰ Fournier, *Autotheory as feminist practice in art, writing and criticism*, 160.

⁴¹ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 97.

⁴² Dyana Gravina, Procreate Project, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.procreateproject.com/oxytocin-mothering-the-world-page/#>.

Her work offers a compelling illustration of challenging conventional notions of motherhood and caregiving within societal and cultural contexts, which aligns with the central argument of the enquiry and the desire I have for my own artistic practice. Her narratives from which she creates, are anchored in the stories of marginalized women and infused with powerful symbolism, that offer valuable insights and serves as a compelling model, for how I can also disrupt traditional narratives and foster a more inclusive and transformative discourse about mothers and mothering with other mothers and non-mothers. I plan to use her example to create a community-driven art of mothers and non-mothers inside academia to test how the study and work environment can include parents' needs in order to foster a socially sustainable community. I will try to encompass these examples of multiplicities of mothering in my artistic practice as a way to expand them visually and raise awareness and promote discussions on these subjects.

REFLECTIONS

Writing about the theories behind lived experiences is a painful process as they embody themselves like haunting ghosts in my mind, causing my steps to become burdensome and my body to feel heavy. The process to validate and liberate the weight is through artistic means.

Reflecting on my research question: Can autotheory be an artistic method to unveil the multiplicities of embodiment within the experience of mothering?, and analyzing the research that so far has delved into several facets of mothering, it's important to recognize that the multitude of mothering facets is ever-evolving, mirroring the shifts in society, making it impossible to tackle them all, though they are indeed finite in number. The enquiry has not only affirmed the viability of autotheory as a potent artistic tool but has also revealed the depth and complexity of the maternal experiences. The intertwining narratives, ranging from the complexities of gendering mothering to the nuances of mothering one's inner child, collectively assert that the artistic exploration of motherhood transcends conventional boundaries. By addressing societal expectations, power dynamics, and the psychological intricacies of caregiving, the research underscores the pressing need for continued conversations, artistic expressions, and critical examinations to unearth and amplify the diverse narratives within the realm of motherhood. The canvas of mothering is vast and ever-

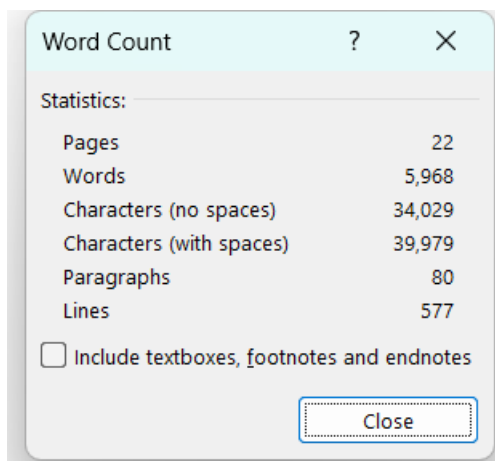
expanding, inviting a continual dialogue that recognizes and celebrates its embodied multiplicities.

While society has etched a singular image of the devoted mother as the archetype of maternal dedication, through this enquiry vast complexities inherent in the practice of mothering and the experiences of mothers in contemporary society have been presented. Through the lens of embodiment, it has critically examined and reshaped what we understand through the process of mothering and the distinction between the mother and mothering.

The case studies presented support these theories and the use of autotheory as an artistic stage is opening the conversation on different aspects of maternal experiences.

Through my artistic practice, I plan to use autotheory as an artistic strategy for visual artworks and a performative act that disrupts traditional narratives and fosters a more inclusive and transformative discourse about mothers and mothering. Furthermore, I plan to create a community of mothers and non-mothers that can ask for alternatives, inclusion and possibilities inside academia environment.

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