The Mother Thing in Pictures: From Antagonism to Affection

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The maternal embrace is an iconic pose for women posing with children. Characteristic of mother and child depictions in Christianity, even contemporary images appear as loaded patriarchal symbols. This essay examines the taxonomy of the mother across a range of photographic images from 1920 to the present. Looking for representational alternatives to the passive, silent mother images that dominate photography and visual culture, I want to show the mother to be more diverse than widespread representations will have us believe. I find autobiographies and photographic self-portraits by ambivalent mothers, lesbian mothers, black mothers, and childless mothers. These offer new possibilities and critical voices often absent from feminist discourses that usually deride or celebrate motherhood in overly simplistic terms. In turn, I have sought to complicate representations of the mother and the maternal embrace by analysing my embodied experience of being her. As a photographer-mother, I have floundered between antagonism and affection toward pictures of women with children. In response, I transport the mother from one world of appearances to another: from the symbolic realm of passivity, stillness, softness and silence to the affective and embodied realm of touching seen in the close-up zoomed-in details of mother and child imagery.

Keywords: Mother Thing, mother photographs, Barthes' mother, hidden mother, maternal embrace, feminist motherhood.

Introduction

Since 2007 I have been collecting and examining hundreds of images of women with children. Some images date back to the early 1900s, while others were taken in 2019 and 2020. They have been gathered indiscriminately from flea markets, discarded family albums, magazines, newspapers and social media platforms. There is a repetition of form across the various sources: a woman and child in a firm and affectionate embrace, one body with another (Fig.1). We see women posing with children on their laps, in their arms or in a pram. The women appear happy and excited at times, while they appear serious or ambivalent in other images. There are many mothers and grandmothers holding babies or toddlers in a bunch. In comparison, there are very few pictures of men who are fathers or grandfathers. I assume they were taking the photographs, always behind the camera, directing the scene's creation.

In pictorial terms, a woman plus a child equals a mother. The mother is a thing as the categories of Car, Ball, Toy, Dog, Cat, Apple and Gun are things. I have come to call her the ‘Mother Thing’. The Mother Thing is an imaginary and aspirational figure overdetermined by representation. She wavers between mystical stories from Christianity to tired clichés of advertising and Disney make believe.

The Mother Thing possesses beauty, grace, and poise similar to Roland Barthes' mother, Henriette, who acts as a silent ghost haunting photography's history, theory, and practice. On-screen, the Mother Thing is Hollywood's Joan Crawford wrecking ball and television's needy 'smother'. In news images, she is Lindy Chamberlain, the 'evil angel', the mother suspected of killing her baby. Alternatively, she is the wretched and mourning mother of K. M. Asad’s image of Rohingya women and children fleeing war

and atrocity. For the family album, the mother is whatever we need her to be at any given time, the one we attach to or detach from. Today on social media, evidenced in the millions of images on the popular site Instagram, the mother is a hashtag consisting of prescribed performances of easily reproducible feminine tropes. If she displays ambivalence to these tropes, she is neglectful. If she is seen striving for perfection, showing herself doing it all and being it all, clever, caring, fit and feminine, then she is 'good-enough.'[1]

Fig. 1. The author's collection of mother and child photographs sourced from eBay and other vintage photo-graphy sellers.

The definition of 'mother' is a relational one—a woman in relation to her child. The meaning of 'mothering' is tied to this relational matrix through acts of care and nurturance for the child. The 'Mother Thing' is secured to these meanings and to a high degree of conformity abound in images and stories. As Jacqueline Rose states: 'To be a

mother is to be saturated with the good and evil of the day.'[2] The world of images and appearances is where the Mother Thing – the patriarchal imaginary, the ideal mother resides. She is something and everything. She appears not as she is.

Autobiographical Intercessions

My fixation on women and children images appears alongside a complex maternal subjectivity. As I write this essay, I am aware that both patriarchal and feminist thinking occupy my psyche in contradictory ways, muddying my attempts to write and analyse mother images and foiling my efforts to live as a mother. While I study such images, I keep tripping over skeins of confusion. I note that a dogma arranges my internal dialogue into a conflict between the self who is a mother and the self who is the artist-academic-feminist. Can writing this paper reconcile my conflict?

When I became a mother in 2007, I experienced (or perceived) a shift in my societal status from woman to mother. I could see myself being seen by others, not as myself, but as a patriarchal sign. Detained in a psychic labyrinth, subsumed by the maternal body that was initially a hothouse for another being, I lost my rectangular and hard-edged form. I had become the maternal subject, rounder and fleshier, bearing what Rose describes as 'the pernicious weight of the ideal.'[3] This 'weight' is not the physical weight of the ideal body that women must conform to, but the weight of it all, of being and looking the part of the ideal feminine mother. I could not reconcile this image – the one reflected in the mirror, in photographs, in the echo of shop windows – with myself. Difficulty seeing myself as a maternal body continued when I breastfed, pushed a pram, carried my child in my arms, and when I was patting, holding, rocking and swaying her.

When I breastfed, I was failing my feminism. If I did not breastfeed, I was failing at motherhood. The breast, Rose notes, is the 'supreme symbol of mother love.'[4]

Studying the pictorial mother is a self-splitting task. This analysis of the mother in visual culture and autobiographical texts and photographic artworks interlocks with the mother and the photographer I am in the world. This entanglement, a conflict of interest, so to speak, complicates and enriches my encounter with the mother in the picture. Against this backdrop, I offer a feminist intervention that critiques and transforms the Mother Thing beyond the limitations of femininity or failure. I want to open up other ways to think about the mother both within and beyond representation. I want to use images of mothers to reassess the 'mother in the picture.' To do this, I must access the living, breathing mother that I am in the world.

After I pose with my children for regular family snaps, holding them in my arms or having them seated on my lap, I encounter myself as a loaded patriarchal symbol of passivity and nurture. On the other hand, I am drawn to the knowledge of the body, the intimate, and the affectionate and haptic experience of being two bodies in love and entangled. I look for a way out of this dualistic bind. Thankfully, in autobiography and photographic self-portraiture, I find some answers.

The Mother Thing

In the first instance, reading about the lives of other artists, in this case in two autobiographies of novelists Ann Enright and Rachel Cusk, I am afforded the tender recognition that my internal dialogue and indeed my confusion, is remarkably commonplace. Both write frankly of their experience of motherhood but also the backlash to their stories. Writing for *The Guardian* newspaper (2001), Cusk disclosed

comments she received from women who had read her book, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*

> People do not like women complaining - or writing, or even speaking, in an unconventional way - about motherhood […] Good mothers, it seems, don't write about motherhood. They're so busy being good mothers that they don't even read about motherhood, except in its sole legitimate literary form, the childcare manual.[5]

What I vainly considered a particularity of individual experience is instead a psychic drama with many equivalences in other women's lives. Autobiography and autobiographical photography offer views to counter the Mother Thing.

When reading Anne Enright's razor-sharp account *Making Babies* (2004), I recognised the Irish novelist's clash with becoming a mother. One confession, in particular, was stabbing: 'So, for a while I try to be, and am, that 'mother' thing – the one who holds everyone, even myself, and keeps us safe.'[6] I highlighted this sentence on my Kindle, underlined it in pencil on the page of a borrowed library book, scribbled her words into my notebook, reading over and over again: 'I try to be, and am, that 'mother' thing.' What a writer like Enright offers a photographer like me are *words*. Her words – *that 'mother' thing* – while informing the title of this essay, also prompted me to ask, who and what is that 'Mother Thing' which Enright *tries* to be? What is the Mother Thing I have tried so hard *not* to be? While I feel myself to have fought the Mother Thing in favour of remaining the fiercely independent-critical- feminist-photographer-thing, I am undoubtedly and lovingly a mother.

The cultural obsession with mother and child images can be traced from the 19th century hidden mother photographs (which I will come to discuss) to Julia Margaret Cameron's vignetted carnal arrangements. While the 1930s and 1940s saw the emergence of a tough, asexual, stoic Mother Thing who could survive the Great Depression, the 1950s pictured her as the domestic goddess of white goods and picket fences. Today we have the precise glamour of the 'yummy mummy' (Fig.2): an attractive, sexy young woman with young children and an SUV.[7] The Mother Thing is an archetype, and femininess is her insignia. As fashions change so do her details. She remains a mythical creature from one decade to another – a thing sustained in the falsehood of the still image.

Fig. 2. Participants from the Australian reality television show *Yummy Mummies*. Image source — https://www.newidea.com.au/yummy-mummies-stars-welcome-babies-to-the-world.

Littered across various forms of visual media are portrayals of women performing the maternal embrace. Like the Madonna and child, the mother performs a gesture of tender reverence; she bows or tilts her face downward to fix her gaze on her child. The embrace is often performed by a seated mother draped in flowing robes and crowned by a glowing aureole or translucent veil. This symbolic arrangement of a woman and a child is above all iconographic. Geoffrey Batchen states, 'All portraits of a mother holding her offspring recall, sometimes consciously, the Christian iconography of Madonna and child, the ideal emblem of maternal performance.'[8] A contemporary example are images of the Duchess of Cambridge Kate Middleton with her children. The maternal embrace's figurative arrangement is mimicked in the British Royal's formally issued portrait (Fig.3). Soon after the birth of her daughter, Princess Charlotte, Middleton poses with her husband, Prince William. Despite standing and appearing tired, Middleton embodies a mash-up of Mother Mary and Disney Princess. She materialises as a contemporary icon imbuing Hollywood grace, make-believe, textbook femininity and maternal instinct.[9]

In the silence of the image, the Mother Thing is organised around stillness and silence.[10] Like Middleton, she appears supremely calm and contented. She holds her child, all its weight, in perpetual muteness. She is often smiling, and when not, she issues the perfect blend of prescribed femininity, softness, poise, and function. This is the scene enacted in millions of images of women with children. Recent depictions of mothers have scarcely caught up with the 21st century lived experience of mothering, which is altogether more varied and arguably more shared across the sexes than it once was. Aside from a small range of stereotypes (for instance, 'busy working mums'),

images of mother and child are generally laden with cloying expressions of heteronormativity, passivity, and feminine accomplishment (Fig.4).[11]

Fig. 3. The Duchess of Cambridge and Prince William on the front cover of People Magazine, 18 May 2015.

My experience of viewing and being a mother is tinged with affection and antagonism: affection toward the proximity of human relations, touch and tenderness portrayed; antagonism toward the loaded patriarchal symbol I continue to read as a 'thing'. The Mother Thing is stuck, unable to free herself from the still image's limits

and the stereotype of an asexual or hyper-sexual, pure or monstrous, untouchable or dominatable thing. If representations of mother and child are loaded symbols, which I am arguing (hardly a new argument), how can signification be disrupted within the parameters of still photography? I am searching for the creative ways that photographers have freed the mother from her stereotypical limits. I am searching specifically for examples that do not reject motherhood but rather rebel against her dominant form while still portraying intimacy between mother and child.

Fig. 4. An example of a mother breastfeeding a baby in mainstream sources of visual communication. Image source — https://uk.style.yahoo.com/breastfeeding-mum-appears-cover-mother-baby-magazine-cue-controversy-120501521.html.

Myth Disruption

My attempt to free the mother from the feminine stereotype emerged in 2009 when I began photographing myself with my children. When it was time to photograph my family, I created an eccentric family album not bound to social tropes or familial traditions. Instead, I came armed with a camera, self-timer, and a face mask. This series was called *My Face* (2010) (Figs. 5-8). It is no mistake that I have not exhibited this work publicly. They are such strange images and so private. And while eleven years have passed, I am still uncertain of their status. This essay is their first outing, albeit a safe outing within the scholarly page.

Fig. 5. Author image. From the series *My Face* 2010.

The title *My Face* was a riff on the social media platform MySpace (one of many platforms that Facebook has superseded). It also explicitly referenced the mask, a white, somewhat frightening blank mask made from plastic, readily available in craft

stores for collaging or painting. I wore the mask repeatedly when taking family photographs. Across the images I can be seen undertaking tasks characteristic of motherhood such as feeding my daughter in a highchair (Fig.5), changing my son's nappy (Fig.6), and cradling my son during a harrowing week in hospital (Fig. 7). In the strangest image from the series, I am kneeling in the shower naked but hidden behind my son's tiny body (Fig.8). My daughter is beside me mirroring my maternal hold. She holds a doll, who, like my son, has a tiny penis on show. We are being drenched by the water spouting from the showerhead above.

Fig. 6. Author image. From the series *My Face* 2010.

In the early years of parenting, between 2007-2010, I tried to find alternative ways to enter and create our family album. As the photographer in the family, I was often not present in the frame. This suited me. However, since I was also a mother and found the mother's image inadequate, I sought to undo or intervene in the symbols that

ordinarily rendered an archetype. The mask seemed to achieve this by turning an ordinary snapshot of a familial scene into a freak show, destabilising the signification that usually emanates from the smiling face in regular family photographs.

Fig. 7. Author image. From the series *My Face* 2010.

Fig. 8. Author image. From the series *My Face* 2010.

The signification bound up in images of the 'good enough' mother is complicated by the strangeness of the mask. I portray myself caring for children while hiding or distancing myself from the task. These images make visible the entanglement of love and affection with ambivalence and a refusal to submit to the Mother Thing. The mask also turns me into a faceless object. This suggests I am withholding myself from my children whereas the acts of care show me to be attentive and focused on their needs. *My Face* was not the first or last time I employed the tactic of hiding from the camera. I have understood the paradoxical act of hiding my face from the lens as a form of resistance. Hiding allows me to show up without having to reveal or disclose who I am and how I appear. Arguably, there is some power in withholding one's image in a world saturated in images.[12]

I look to contemporary photographic artists who have similarly undone the tropes of familial imagery.[13] American artist Catherine Opie's iconic self-portrait with her son, *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004) (Fig.9), is perhaps the most well-known example of a lesbian butch mother portrayal. Opie photographs herself breastfeeding her son performing the maternal embrace. Her flesh is covered in tattoos and scars. Across her chest is the scarification of the word 'pervert', a reference to an earlier self-portrait *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994) when the lettering was moist and bleeding. Opie is powerful in this performance; she is larger than life, connecting lesbianism with the mother figure. The self-portrait is also exceptional in its mimicry of the Christian icon. She achieves perfect postural imitation of the Madonna and child while also subverting it. The details of her appearance, with its masculine largess, sizeable breasts, cropped hair, tattooed

skin and the overgrown toddler suckling, turn the usual aestheticisation of the passive and pretty mother on its head. Opie's self-violence, cutting, bleeding and scarring is characteristic of a practice at odds with the passive, pretty mother. Perhaps more significantly is that Opie brings the lesbian mother to visibility.

Fig. 9. Catherine Opie. *Self Portrait/Nursing* 2004. C-print40 x 32 inches (101.6 x 81.3 cm). © CatherineOpie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Another artist expanding the vision of mothering is Australian video and performance artist Danica Knezevic. In *Not the Mama* (2019), Knezevic, like Opie,

performs the maternal embrace, except Knezevic is nursing an imagined baby. She carries a baby never had in her arms, a baby she chose not to have (Fig.10). She sways with an invisible babe in arms, gesturing tenderness and knowing with her face toward the invisible other. In *Not the Mama,* Knezevic reclaims the significance of the non-mother mother/caregiver by reproducing the iconic maternal embrace with an invisible cradled subject. Knezevic is also the lesbian mother or the lesbian non-mother mother. The invisibility of the baby in Knezevic's arms mirrors the invisibility of her status as mother caregiver.

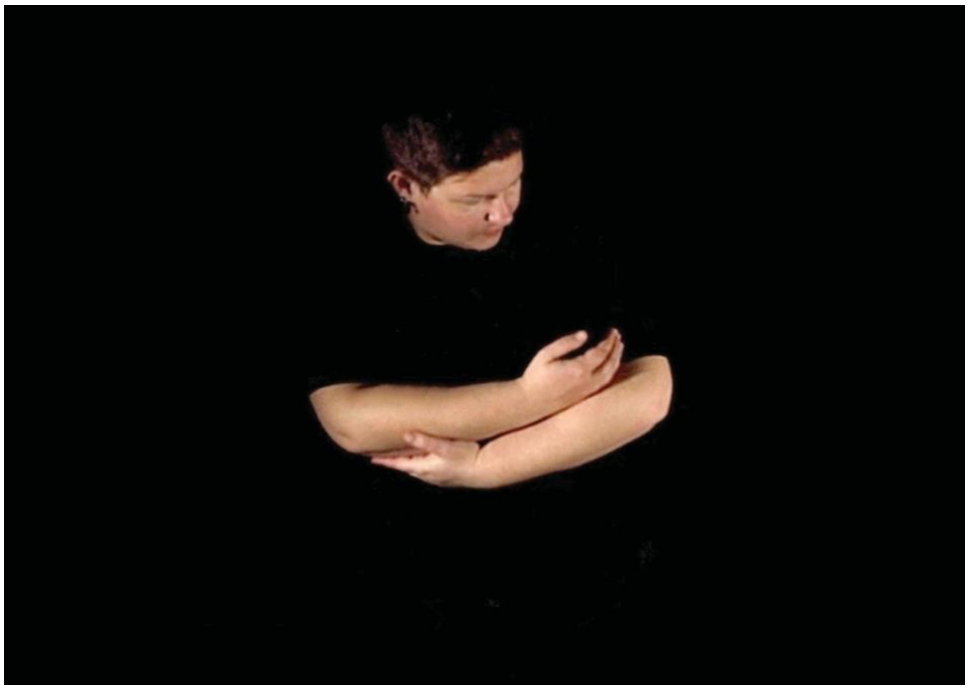

Fig. 10. Danica Knezevic. *Not the Mama* 2019. Still from HD Digital Video. © and courtesy Danica Knezevic.

Knezevic is known for her rousing performance work where she issues actions from herself that constitute care for others. It is important to note that she is the sole carer for her mother, crippled by polio as a child. She cares for her mother as a mother, helping her through the daily activities of life. The care performed for her mother is

visualised in several works such as *Lay with Me* (2016), a performance of laying with strangers in a bed and hugging, reading or chatting together. There are also collaborations with her now-deceased grandparents, for whom she was also a caregiver in *Enacting Dream/Always Knitting* (2018) and *The Creation of a Carer* (2016). Since a child, she has cared for many adults in her family, yet she is denied the status of mother. This highlights how the mother is inextricably linked to the caring of one's child.[14]

Another example, an earlier one, is Renee Cox's *The Yo Mama* (1993) (Fig.11). Cox is an African American artist. In this self-portrait, she portrays herself as the 'black mother' to confront the colonial image of the 'mammy.' Cox's tall muscular black physique is gloriously naked except for a pair of stilettos. She appears like a superhero from a Marvel movie, towering over the viewer while carrying a toddler as though he were a piece of machinery. She poses like a soldier holding a machine gun. A gun is a machine of death and violence. A baby is the symbol of life. The way she holds the baby conflates the human and non-human subjects. Her hold thwarts the regular tenderness enveloping a child in the maternal embrace. Her gaze is similarly powerful and forces the viewer to look directly up at her. We are not witnessing a woman of meek servitude; this is the God Atlas holding the Earth's globe. Elsewhere, like Opie, Cox has also staged herself in the place of the Madonna. In a photograph ironically titled *Yo Mamadonna and Child* (1994) (Fig.12), Cox is dressed in a colourful and exquisitely patterned costume made of African fabrics with a large headdress made of feathers. Her son is seated naked on her lap as the African baby Jesus.

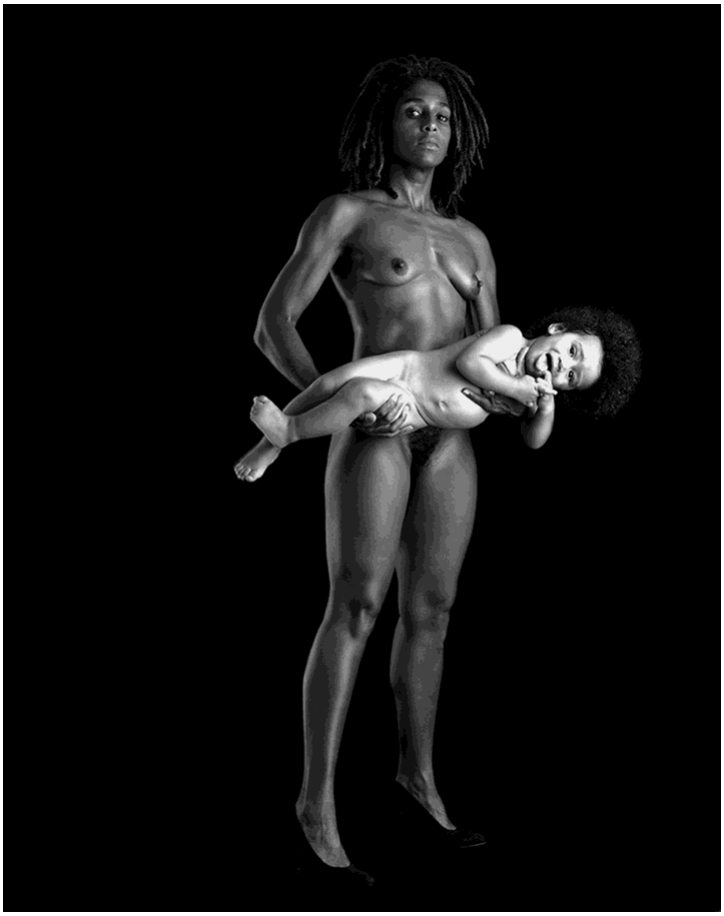

Fig. 11. Renee Cox. *The Yo Mama* 1993. Archival digital ink jet print on cotton rag. 4 × 7 ft. © Renee Cox.

Opie, Knezevic, and Cox visualise what Andrea Liss labels 'feminist motherhood' – mothering from a feminist mothers' perspective. In *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (2009), Liss suggests Opie and Cox's works foreground the 'feminist mother' in an unprecedented critical framework. Their critique is anchored to the power of self-portraiture to represent the maternal experience from the mother's viewpoint as a photographer. Self-representation in this context counters the perception that a mother is an observed silent figure. Artists like Opie, Knezevic, and Cox sidestep the 'either/or' of being either the Mother Thing or the one who resists motherhood. Feminist motherhood is a critical framework from which to note perspectives of mothering beyond the Mother Thing.

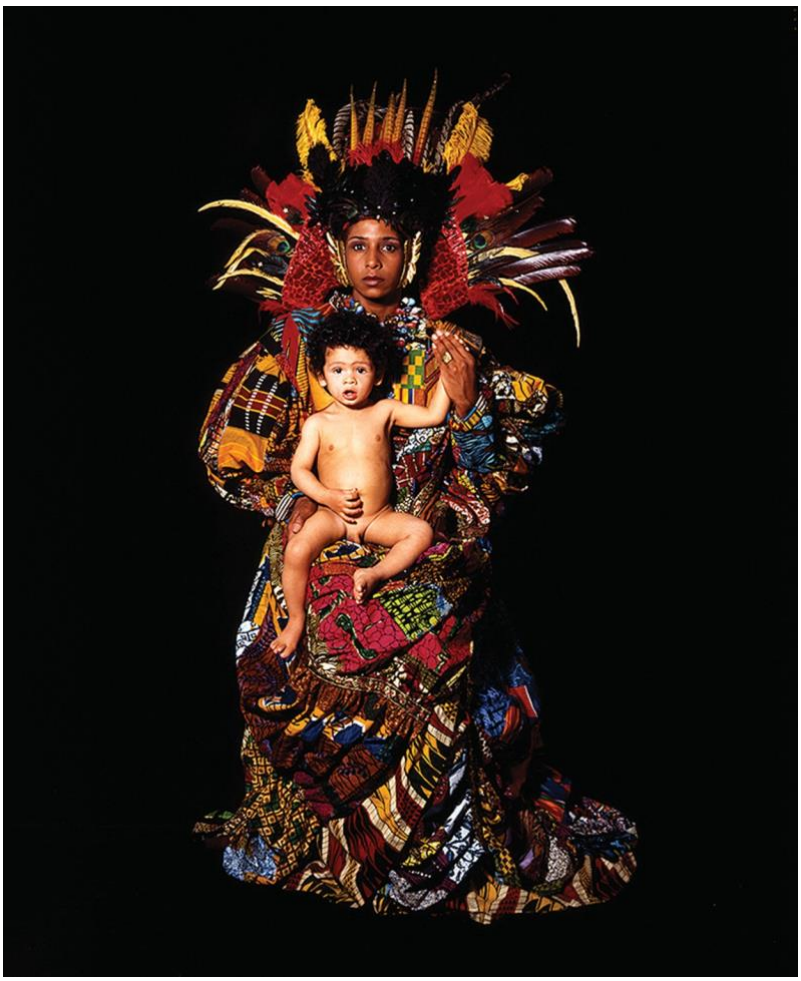

Fig. 12. Renee Cox. *Yo Mamadonna and Child* 1994. Archival digital ink jet print on cotton rag. 48 × 72 in.

Opie, Knezevic, and Cox are not alone. Elinor Carucci's *Monday Morning mother of Two* (2010) (Fig.13) visualises feminist motherhood. In an arresting self-portrait, the artist captures herself performing the maternal embrace while running. The frenzied capture of an ordinary scene pictures the mother of two sprinting in heels, clearly dressed up and in a hurry to deliver her children somewhere. One child is in her arms while the other is outside the frame of the image. However, his shadow is captured on the edge of the photograph, this telling us he has fallen behind and needs to catch up to his harried mother. Carucci pictures herself as a mother in the world trying to do and

be it all. Her harried mother routine critiques the societal demand for mothering perfection.

Carucci is far from the stationary, frozen, silent, passive mother or the Duchess of Cambridge's ladylike, statuesque posing. Instead, in the act of running, she visualises herself as a citizen of public space. Carucci's sprint seems to bypass the requirements of the still photograph. The photograph's ontology is to fix, stabilise, make still, and capture what is living and moving (hence photography's relationship to death). While these functions are integral to the medium’s being and allure, Opie, Knezevic, Cox and Carucci find photographic ways to disrupt the pervasive symbolism which still-images perpetuate so well.

Fig. 13. Elinor Carucci. *Monday morning, mother of two* 2010. Archival pigment print, 36 × 44 in. © Elinor Carucci.

In an ethical study of the work of filmmaker Claire Denis, Kristin Lené Hole argues that the concept 'mother' has been subordinated and fetishised and that once this

position is opened up, freed from the constraints that have constituted a woman as mother, maternity has the freedom to become a process of the intellect, awareness, sensation, and impression, rather than controlled by the meaning of femininity.[15] Hole's argument helps understand how I, along with Opie, Knezevic, Cox, and Carucci, disrupt and resist the Mother Thing.

I also acknowledge another form of the mother's rebellion – pictures of children taken by their photographer mothers. Carol Mavor's study of Viscountess Hawarden's erotic staging of her daughters in the middle of the nineteenth century draws links to Sally Mann's controversial images of her children. Mavor studies the use of children as erotic subjects by their mothers. There are also the important works by Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother* (1936), Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979) and Rineke Dijkstra's 1994 portraits of three mothers, Julia, Saskia, and Tecla, taken one hour, one day and one week after giving birth. These remain influential to the history and practice of the mother in photography. Opie, Knezevic, Cox, and Carucci build on this history while inspiring diverse representations of women's bodies, lesbian women, and women of colour. Fundamentally, these examples offer what Hole declares are a 'feminist investment in myth disruption.'[16]

Silenced and Hidden Mothers

A study of the mother in pictures cannot overlook Roland Barthes' mother. Photography's most famous and celebrated mother, Henriette Barthes, is the immortalised mother of Roland Barthes' mourning, the one we are prevented from seeing as a five-year-old girl in the Winter Garden photograph that is described in Barthes final work, *Camera Lucida* (1980), one of the greatest memorialisations of a

mother by her child. Famously, the Winter Garden photograph of Henriette does not appear in *Camera Lucida,* but Barthes provides a mother and son photograph in his preceding text, *Roland Barthes* (1977). This image is interesting because it shows us who Henriette was (her visibility in *Roland Barthes* emphasises her concealment in *Camera Lucida*). Due to the arrangement of the Barthes' bodies, it offers a unique example of a mother and child photograph. In this photograph, Henriette has lifted Roland into her arms (Fig.14). Roland is eight years of age and well beyond the age where a mother needs to carry her child. He has overgrown her arms and is long-limbed himself; he may reach his mother's height in a couple of years. Roland appears to recognise this and lifts himself by bracing his mother's shoulders to take some of his body weight. Her arms appear strong and committed to providing a human seat for her son.

Despite the influence of Henriette and the Winter Garden photograph in Camera Lucida on the history and theory of photography, she is both invisible and silent.17 In Living With His Camera (2003), the literary theorist Jane Gallop scrutinises the silence of Henriette from the perspective of being a photographed mother herself (Fig.15). She suggests Barthes collapses his mother's goodness with her silence: 'Barthes mother – ideal spectrum, subject of the quintessential photograph – never made a single observation.'18 When Gallop reads Camera Lucida from a photographed mother's perspective, she notes that she is the observed and silent object while the son, Roland, is the thinker, the doer, the observer.

Henriette's silence exemplifies Rebecca Solnit's argument in *The Mother of All Questions, Further Feminisms* (2017). Solnit discusses the empowering role of the

voice, words, and stories and how the right to speak or not speak counters women's dehumanisation through histories of exclusion and silence. Solnit states that 'the history of silence is central to women's history.'[19] Likewise, Enright proclaims, 'Speech is a selfish act, and mothers should probably remain silent.'[20] Ironically, children's social, emotional and communicative development begins from hearing and sensing their mother's voice from inside the womb and continues throughout their early life.[21]

Fig. 14. Photocopy of Roland Barthes and his mother Henriette, taped to the author's office wall.

Gallop suggests Barthes' silent mother is a 'classic gendering' of the passive subject/object of the photograph.[22] The paradox is that her silent passivity is inextricably linked to maternal acts of servitude and heroism. Mavor describes a scene in *Reading Boyishly* where Henriette rescues the young Roland from the local bully boys teasing him.[23] Rose would say Henriette is ‘as fearless as a lioness’, undertaking her societal duty to calm the child’s fears.[24] Though, we perceive her might and power always from her son’s perspective. My initial reading of Gallop surprised me. In the twenty years that I have read and reread *Camera Lucida*, I understood his mother to be a dominant and powerful force. By highlighting Barthes' mother's silence, Gallop has reframed *Camera Lucida* for me, and I cannot unsee, unread, unknow and unhear the paradox of Henriette's silence.

Gallop used words and Blau's images to undo the cliché of the silent mother. In *Living with His Camera* (2003), she describes the nuanced, complex and layered relationship with being the photographed mother. By writing about herself as the mother and the photographic subject, Gallop undoes the silence that embalms Barthes' mother. While Barthes' reflective attachment to photographs of his mother simultaneously and inadvertently silences her, Gallop gives her a voice. There are, however, risks involved in examining maternal imagery, autobiography and maternal experience in scholarly, artistic, and feminist contexts. The mother and the maternal provokes discomfort in critical circles, as the writer Maggie Nelson described in her autobiographical text *The Argonauts* (2015). Nelson recalls a 1998 seminar she attended in graduate school where Jane Gallop presented alongside art historian Rosalind Krauss. Gallop showed an image of herself with her son taken by her partner and filmmaker Dick Blau (Fig.15). She was

describing the image from the standpoint of the photographed mother. Nelson recounts Krauss' reaction to Gallop's presentation: '[…] the tacit undercurrent of her argument, as I felt it, was that Gallop's maternity had rotted her mind.'[25] Nelson continues that 'Krauss acted as though Gallop should be ashamed for trotting out naked pictures of herself and her son in the bathtub, contaminating serious academic space with her pudgy body and unresolved, self-involved thinking.'[26] In other words, Krauss demanded that Gallop be a silent mother.

Fig. 15. Dick Blau. *Summer 1989* 1989. © and courtesy Dick Blau.

In the face of silence, how can representations of the mother be organised around perspectives from the mother? Here I am not searching for the sound of the mother's vocal cords, but rather, as Rebecca Solnit writes, I am searching for the conditions under which the mother has 'the ability to speak up, to participate, to experience oneself and be experienced as a free person.'[27] Further, how does the mother

organise her image? Photographic discourse has primarily promoted the mother as a subject (and object) from others' perspectives, particularly the child. In the case of Barthes, the child is a grown man. From the perspective of Henriette's silence, Gallop, Opie, Knezevic, Cox, and Carucci undertake a reversal – an undoing – that gives a voice to the image and, in turn, it's subject.

It is possible for Henriette, the Mother Thing, to retain the affectionate and beloved status of Barthes' mother while also asserting her autonomy as a woman with a voice. The work of un-silencing Henriette is increasingly achieved by women writing about the maternal experience from a perspective that relays noisier and ultimately more nuanced motherhood experiences. Writer's Cusk, Enright, Gallop and Rose, like their photographic counterparts, Opie, Knezevic, Cox and Carucci, effectively counter the silent mother by examining maternal experience in ways that deliver critical perspectives to the subject. At the beginning of Cusk's *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, she makes a political declaration: 'In motherhood, a woman exchanges her public significance for a range of private meanings.'[28] Like the photographers mentioned in this paper, Cusk sits among writers who give autobiographical and analytical credence to the value of personal experience far from the stereotypical stories presented in the images that saturate popular forms of communication.

Hidden Mothers

I also find myself noticing the mother's silence elsewhere. I cannot look past the peculiar Victorian Era tradition of 'hidden mother' photographic portraits (Fig.16). Children proved difficult subjects for the portraitists using early photographic technology. Children could not be physically still for the long durations needed to make

a sharp image. A solution was to have the child held by an adult disguised as draped furniture and concealed under a heavy cloth. In 2010, an eBay seller of vintage photographs inadvertently named the genre when he described a tintype he was selling as 'funny baby with hidden mother.'[29] The term ‘hidden mother’ quickly emerged to describe a genre of portraiture and vernacular photography created more than a century earlier. The genre of hidden mother portraits was again feted in 2013 by the Italian-Swedish artist Linda Fregni Nagler when she exhibited and published, *The Hidden Mother,* a collection of 997 hidden mother artefacts arranged in a spectacular presentation at the Venetian Arsenal for the 55th Venice Biennale.

Fig. 16. Authors unknown. Two examples of the Hidden Mother. The first demonstrating the gender of the sitteris unknowable, the second appears to be a nanny or servant. Judging by the woman’s skin colour on her arm, shecould be African American. Public Domain source — http://www.mama.mk.ua/forum/klub-po-interesam/enciklo pediya/1180/znaete-li-vy-chto-interesnye-fakty.html?page=31.

I first encountered the hidden mother portraits in an article published in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2013. The portraits' characteristically feature a cloaked ghostlike figure, a spectre, a strange form holding a child. In addition to being cloaked, the portraits also include other modes of concealment. There are mothers with their backs to the camera, mothers with their bodies partially outside the photographic frame, and mothers with their faces scratched out, all the while a child is presented as the photographic subject to the 19th-century photographer.

My first question on witnessing the images was how does the viewer know it is the mother? Since the figures are mostly hidden, there is scant visual evidence across the genre that the hidden figures are always women, let alone the children's mothers. In many examples published in Nagler's book, *The Hidden Mother* (2013), the concealed figure is a man (likely to be the father), while other examples show women who appear to be servants or nannies.

While I am strongly drawn to this historical genre for its peculiarity, I am also provoked by what the title assumes of the mother. According to Geoffrey Batchen, to conceal the mother is an act of eradication that can be read to signal the expectations on women to completely submit to their maternal role, to sacrifice oneself to the norms of family and maternal identity.[30] I agree with Batchen, but what does this say about the hidden mother in *My Face* (2010)? I would argue that unlike the Hidden Mothers I am not being photographed as an object/prop for my child. I am photographing myself. The agency garnered in this action is not insignificant. Modes of power come into play when a mother is photographed by someone else versus when she photographs herself.

Additionally, I am only partially hidden. My eyes conveniently appear through the mask's holes. I have the authority to look back if I choose to.

I also wonder how the genre would transmit if it had been titled *Hidden Fathers*? Batchen further notes:

> although these supporting figures are sometimes indisputably male, they are invariably referred to as 'hidden mother' images in vernacular circles […] as if the erasure of self enacted in such pictures is a manifestly feminine subject position, even a specifically maternal one.[31]

The fixing of the label is a consequence of collapsing the mother (and woman) into a performance of 'erasure.'[32] While it is known that hidden mothers could very well be and often appear to be hidden fathers, the classification remains.

Zooming in and Re-feeling

I want to consider another possibility for portraying and viewing the mother by offering a photographic response attuned to the relational details, the intimate and corporeal contact points. This response has emerged through the course of this writing. How can the mother in the image become less of a figure of signification and more aligned to the affective embodied experience of two bodies in close exchange, reciprocity, affection, and love in a manner not constrained by patriarchal femininity? I return once again to Roland Barthes to discover a connection. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977), he inscribes a caption to the image I discussed earlier (not the Winter Garden Photograph). The caption reads, '*The demand for love*' (author's emphasis).[33] This is all that he notes of the image. However, in rereading *Camera Lucida*, I find Barthes

describing an experience of being held by his mother. He describes the image arousing a sensory recollection of being held by Henriette:

> […] contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child, against her, I can awaken in myself the rumpled softness of her crepe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder.[34]

His experience of looking at this image produces memories that are at once visual, haptic, and olfactory. Ultimately, his Proustian observation produces sensorial remembrance provoked by seeing himself being touched by his mother in the image. Ultimately, seeing himself being touched is seeing himself being loved. Barthes remembers feeling touched both by her embrace and by the details that accompany this embrace; her clothes like a skin, its softness, rumpled, he re-feels her. She is both present and absent. If 'seeing is a form of touching at a distance,' Barthes touches the image of himself in his mother's arms.[35] In other words, he is touching (seeing) himself being touched. In this context seeing is as tactile as an embrace.

I have used Barthes' recollection to galvanise an embodied view that attempts to harness the body beyond its signification as the Mother Thing (if this is even possible). Barthes' recollection of his mother's embrace is provoked by seeing himself touching and being touched. Cognizant that seeing is a form of touching, this double-act profoundly moves me. Barthes' recollection reminds me of slowly viewing an image of my grandmother. A black and white image portrays her in the backyard of her new home in Sydney, Australia, in 1956 (Fig. 17). She is wearing a satin robe, and even though she is dressed for a cold day, the Australian sun is blinding. We can see a slight squint in her eyes as she looks with a half-smile at the camera. Her eldest son (my

father), age 7, stands beside her while holding his brother, her newborn son. Swaddled in a wool blanket, her arms are wrapped protectively around her baby. This gesture strikes me. Her embracing arms encircle the baby, meeting on the underside of his body are her bare hands touching ever-so-slightly at the fingertips (Fig. 17). If we look past the iconic subject of mother and child, what we see in the photograph under the microscope are the details of her touch. Her arms, skin, covered and touched by her clothes, make contact with the blanket's skin. The embrace is the archetypal performance of maternal intimacy, but it is also much more than that. The maternal embrace ushers in our first encounter of physical intimacy and possibly an eternal longing for physical and emotional connection to others.

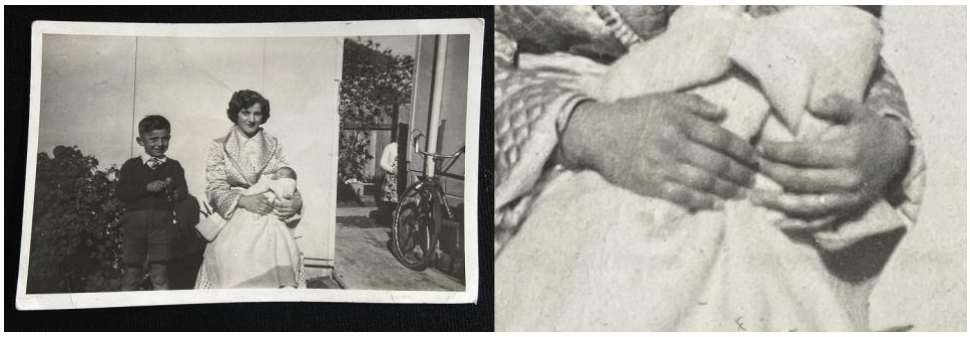

Fig. 17. Unknown photographer. Image of the author's grandmother taken in Sydney Australia in 1956. Details offingers touching.

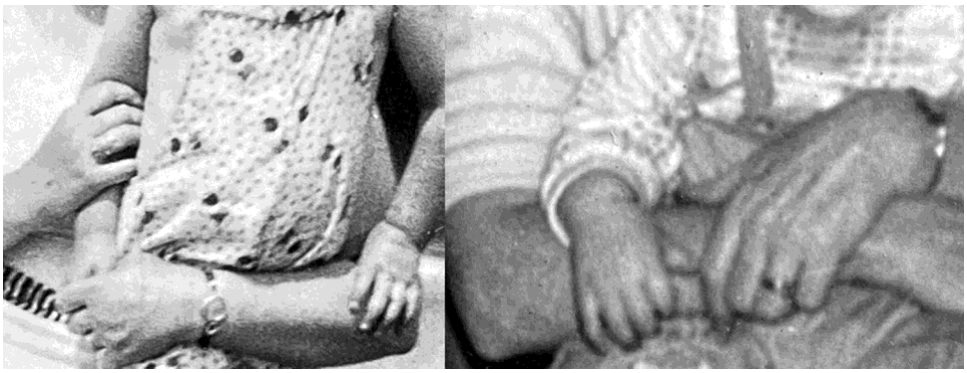

Fig. 18. Details and close-ups of skin on skin contact, or one body in relation to another in the mother and childimages from the author's collection.

How can touch and intimacy be foregrounded in images of mother and child or the maternal embrace? As a feminist photographic intervention, I look closer, much closer to the details of the bodies in the picture, to the space between the bodies, to where the bodies come into contact with each other and touch. Employing a novel visual analysis approach, I have used several images from my collection to create sequences of details so we can see the touch (Figs. 17-20). Seeing touch has the effect of eroticising or creating a charged moment where the mother is no longer a sign or archetype of representation of the family, but rather a body in intimate contact with another body, skin on skin, experiencing proximity and tenderness.

The maternal embrace is a relational gesture: it is the first pose of the baby's body in interchange with another. My question has been whether there is another way to make and read mother and child images? I finally used a digital method of capturing close-ups and details for visual analysis to arrive at new possibilities to arrange a collection of images and thoughts that tenderly and critically address the complex terrain of the mother as a photographic subject (Fig. 18). The close-up has the potential to make strange and to reiterate a body positively limitless, unhampered by social and cultural signification and the roles and obligations of gender.[36]

Arguably, representations of the body and bodies together, entangled and embracing in quotidian attachment, may not by-pass signification altogether. However, they can at least open a space to discuss the love we feel toward others, whether they be a friend, a foetus, a dog, a child, a child that is now an adult, a lover, or another mother. The embrace, touch, proximity to the other and their body, and the closeness represented in images, can move us as embodied spectators. In this approach, I want to

acknowledge that the tension in being *together with* and *apart from* another human being is bound in the images we make of women with children. Mindful looking and a method of zooming-in is a mode of affection. The mother and child are over there, in the distance. However, what happens if we get a lot closer? Theoretically, we can attempt to side-step signification by consciously bringing ourselves closer. Practically, we can employ 'mindful seeing', a deliberate sort of looking that involves honing in, getting closer to the details of the image, to the details of the body, to the points of contact where arms encircle, wrap, fold, bend, carry, hold, hug, where the skin is warm to touch, where touch is mediated through clothes, and blankets brush up against the skin of the other and to the details that affirm intimacy (Fig. 19).

Fig. 19. Zooming in. From the author's collection.

Getting closer to the image's details catalyses a broader discussion of the mother and child and the maternal embrace; it opens questions that encompass affect, the body, intimacy and touch (which all require deeper discussion in another essay). The experience of being a photographer-mother-daughter-observer is both a methodology and a perspective that complicates but also enriches my encounter with even the most cliché images of the mother. Studying the coupling of a woman and child means studying myself with my child. By getting closer, I form a visual and cognitive accumulation *of body to body contact*. This is an encounter with the body, specifically the maternal body and the body of a child. I unveil the Mother Thing from the mother's perspective, which combines the embodied knowledge of holding onto a child and in turn being held as a child.

Conclusion

In *Of Woman Born* (1976), Adrienne Rich recognised the complexities in negotiating the patriarchal imaginary of motherhood with the lived experience of mothering. Rich's analysis offered feminist mothers a non-binary view that refused the patriarchal imaginary. Rich valued the act of mothering as an embodied, felt, and lived experience, while rejecting the institution of motherhood as a patriarchal construction. As a feminist mother I want to continue this work.

In this essay I have positioned the mother as an important figure in the history of photography and visual culture while arguing this significance is compromised by her stillness and silence. As an antidote to this I have shared the creative and critical contributions artists have made through self-portraiture and autobiography, examining how resistance and refusal is visualised to offer alternatives to the Mother Thing. With

respect to Barthes, it is not the son's perspective that I am seeking here. Rather, like Enright I direct all my questions to mothers.

> Are all mothers Manicheans? This is just one of the hundreds of questions that have never been asked about motherhood. What I am interested in is not the drama of being a child, but this new drama of being a mother […] about which so little has been written. Can mothers not hold a pen?[37]

To answer Enright, I had to look up the word Manichean to discover its meaning was already central to my study. Self-representation through self-portraiture and autobiography are used by women refusing the Manichaean bind of the Mother Thing. As a photographer-mother I have learnt through the course of this study that I need not make a choice between good or evil, soft or hard, affection or antagonism, femininity or masculinity, mothering or non-mothering. Instead, I can hold a pen and a camera, I can move, make noise, zoom in and out, to create pictures that visualise affection and ambivalence together and thus refuse to be Manichean.

Enright showed her readiness for the proclamations furled at her in anger for daring to write about motherhood in a way that does not fulfil the imaginary 'ideal' Mother Thing. She candidly reveals herself as a mother willing to dish the dirt on motherhood. In other words, she will not continue the conspiratorial propagating of mother myths, the clichés of motherly love, and maternal instinct performed by women for centuries. She will also not remain silent as Krauss would have liked Gallop to.

Love and shame, ambivalence and surrender, rage and denial. When Enright tries to hold everyone to keep them safe, or Gallop gives Henriette Barthes her voice, or Opie and Knezevic 'out' lesbian motherhood (and non-mothering motherhood), or Cox

frees the 'mammy' from slavery and servitude, we observe an organised system of creative feminist reparative acts which return the voice to all the silent mothers frozen in pictures (and, as Enright would argue, in everyday life). However, this constitutes but another cliché – the maternal aspiration to amend and fix. Nevertheless, all the expressions denied of the mother and her stereotypes and clichés can be outed together with clarity and criticism.

Through the course of this writing, I have returned to the family album I began creating in 2007. Admittedly, a reading of my own work has been the most confronting part of this analyses. My portrayal of myself in the shower with my children eleven years ago 'pricks' me today (Fig.8).[38] Past the symbolic defiance of the mask, I peer into my eyes and admit to re-feeling my quiet desperation. Perhaps this is what the mask was hiding. In those days, there was no escape; no time for making art, no time for thinking and undertaking analysis like this, no time for writing, no time even for a solo shower. Art had to be tiptoed stealthily into the daily routines of life between sleeps.

If I analyse the scene in the shower from a distance, I can see a mother's refusal to be Manichean. I also see the steadfast persistence of a mother who can arrange a camera on the floor of her bathroom, set up and trigger the self-timer, keep hold of her slippery son, answer her daughter's questions, shower her children clean and still attune to her artistic and feminist urges to don a mask that hides her face and retain her identity as a photographer and feminist mother.

Fig. 20. Getting in closer to see the touch in *My Face* 2010.

In my family photographs the mother directs the family, the mother chooses the scenes. When the mother looks at the camera, she is looking at herself as a free person. This is the self-reflexive reparative power of self-portraiture. It is also the power of attuning to the body and to touch. When I zoom-into the shower scene (Fig. 20) I see our affection in close detail as evidence of the love and care I have for my children alongside my ambivalence and refusal to be the Mother Thing. By holding a pen in one hand and a camera in the other I move to reconcile my conflict with the beauties and horrors that constitute the ongoing complexities of this relational maternal existence.

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[1] Mavor, *Reading boyishly,* 131; I was introduced to D.W. Winnicott's concept of the 'good-enough mother' by Carol Mavor in *Reading Boyishly* (2007).

[2] Rose, *Mother*, 183; *Mothers: An essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018) by Jacqueline Rose offers a comprehensive critique of societies investment in the mother. She examines the burden of the mother through the dichotomies that have come to define her and the no way out binds of needing to be everything for everyone and everything.

[3] Ibid., 188.

[4] Ibid., 84.

[5] Cusk, "The Language of Love," 2013

[6] Enright, *Making Babies*, 66.

[7] Fahd and Oscar, "From hidden women," para. 17.

[8] Batchen, "Hiding in Plain Sight," 7.

[9] Intriguingly, when Middleton's counterpart, Meghan Markel the Duchess of Sussex was photographed with Prince Harry after their child's birth, it is Prince Harry who is charged with

carrying the new-born baby Archie. Why is it that Markel, the mother, was denied the performance of the maternal embrace? Is it because Markel, as an African American woman, challenges the conventional image of British Royal mother? It is hard to know whether this is an outcome of 'soft' racism, or Markel's choice, or whether hundreds of configurations were posed on the day and the final portrait chosen was the unconventional pick of the unconventional royals. Either way, the images detach Markel from the obligatory maternal composition that would otherwise signify her royal and feminine achievements.

[10] In *Philosophy and the Maternal Body* (1998), Michelle Boulous Walker focuses on the silence of the feminine voice in philosophy. She uses motherhood and the maternal to critique the silencing of the feminine in Western thought. In contrast, I am not focused on the feminine but rather on representations of the mother bound to the feminine. I am seeking other forms of the mother beyond the feminine one. I am not arguing for the feminine mother's voice rather for voices not tied alone to the feminine.

[11] As Jacqueline Rose (188) argues this is not simply a matter of representation alone, 'the worst, most insufferable demand that so many cultures of the modern world impose on their mothers is not just the saccharine image laid across the mother in expectation of a better future, but the vast reach of historical, political and social anguish that we thereby ask a mother to nullify.'

[12] See *Hiding – Self Portraits* (2009-2010) and *Visible Mothers* (2010-2019).
https://cherinefahd.com/HIDING-self-portraits-2009-2010~1246
https://cherinefahd.com/VISIBLE-MOTHERS-2010-2019~1231

[13] Cinematic narrative appears to critically challenge the fantasies of the patriarchal mother with more regularity and ease. I am thinking of Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* from 1975, and Clare Denis', *Nénette and Boni* (1997). Hollywood film however enjoys propagating and even exaggerating her.

[14] Not to mention the reproduction of a child raises further questions for adoptive and fostering mothers.

[15] Hole, *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics,* 76-78.

[16] Ibid., 80.

[17] Gallop, *Living with His Camera,* 26.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions*, 18.

[20] Enright, *Making babies*, 11.

[21] Sansone, *Mothers, Babies*, 115-118.

[22] Gallop, *Living with His Camera*, 27.

[23] Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 130-131.

[24] Rose, *Mothers*, 192-193.

[25] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 50-51.

[26] Ibid., 51.

[27] Solnit, *The Mother of all Questions*, 20.

[28] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, 3.

[29] Nagler et al., *The Hidden Mother*, 14.

[30] Batchen, *Negative/Positive*, 218.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 5.

[34] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 65.

[35] Montagu, *Touching*, 124.

[36] Hole, *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics*, 78.

[37] Enright, *Making babies*, 42.

[38] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 47.