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TITLE:

MATERNAL IDENTITY: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I declare that this thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree *Philosophiae Doctor* with Fondazione Reggio Children (FRC), Reggio Childhood Studies Doctoral School at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UNIMORE), Department of Education and Humanities, Reggio Emilia, Italy, is my own work and has not previously been submitted for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

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Date: 20 October 2024

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, overlapping loops and lines, positioned to the right of the 'Signature:' label.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

I undertook this study under the auspices of, and with financial support from Fondazione Reggio Children, Reggio Childhood Studies Doctoral School in collaboration with the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia.

ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

That *mother* is a constant in all of us is known; we all have one, some are one, all have mother-stories. But that all women are *defined by motherhood* within a patriarchal system is a political, gendered experience and an academic field of study (Rich, 2021/1976). The motivation for my study was Raphael-Leff's belief that this is still under-explored in the academy (2010b). The politics of motherhood is also a personal interest that was born from my societal and familial story, and more recently the demise of my marriage and my wish to create meaning from it. Only in the subjectivation of mothers do they become nuanced human beings rather than a stereotypical group of objects seen through a patriarchal lens (Rich, 2021/1976). I believe that mother-subjects are born one woman, and one story, at a time. Auto/Biography as 'epistemological orientation and methodological approach' (Parsons & Chappell, 2020: 289) often addresses the politics of epistemology, methodology, reflectivity, positionality, and power. I therefore approach this study from a feminist, social constructionist, auto/biographic, narrative position in order to hear the voices of a few subject-mothers and use them academically in an ethical way. My socially constructed position has a great impact on how my identity is shaped and on the knowledge I create through this study (Misawa, 2010). Because I have a feminist political agenda, I claim my positionality through telling my own life story. I also tell the story of the city of Reggio Emilia and of the Reggio Emilia Approach, the background against which I do this study. I build my study on some of the fundamental principles of the Reggio Philosophy, namely social constructionism, the narrative voice, the politics of epistemology, ecosystemic and complexity theories, and interdisciplinarity. Apart from me as researcher as well as full participant, I include eight other mothers as research participants in group conversations and with writing tasks. I approach the data collection phase with the general maternal identity theme in mind, but without further agenda. The effect of this strict social construction is that the group steers the process, and the data guides me towards the themes on which the thesis is built. I use three data sets, namely verbatim transcripts of the research participant meetings, writing tasks done by the research participants, and the personal reflective journal I kept throughout the study. I use the data to do a thematic content analysis, write

character sketches of the other research participants, create free-form poetry and I-poetry, and to write polyphonic compound characters' stories. I aim to define and explore the three ways in which the mother-field is generally divided, namely mother (as title and identity as a social construct), mothering (the experience and tasks of a mother, including the gendered division of labour, the mother's mental load, allomothering, and the hierarchy of motherhood), and motherhood (as patriarchal institution). The first of two major themes born from the data, is maternal ambivalence. I address the dilemma that classical psychoanalysis created for mothers who want their own lives and careers and who also want to raise their children to become highly functioning adults (Hrdy, 2000). I discuss this theme against the *Madonna-Whore* myth, political- and sacral mythology, the choice – or not – to be a mother, and the competition between mothers' different roles for time, effort, and money. The second of the two major themes include social- as well as intra-psychic norms and expectations, judgement, and punishment, disobedience and transgression, and the possibility of personal freedom. With this study I contribute to the academy – and specifically also to auto/biography as research approach and method – by adding subjective, anecdotal mother-stories. I further offer reflections on the value of *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976), I work creatively with the data, and I create an incidental psychotherapeutic group process. My wish is that readers, some through projective identification with other mothers' stories and some through hearing the subjective voices of mothers, will also benefit from reading the text.

KEY WORDS

Auto/Biography; Motherhood; Maternal Identity; Social Constructionism; Interdisciplinarity.

THESIS AREA

Motherhood Studies; Gender Studies; Qualitative Research; Auto/Biography.

SCIENTIFIC SECTOR

Interdisciplinarity: Sociology, Feminist Philosophy, Psychoanalysis.

ABSTRACT (ITALIANO)

Che la *madre* sia un costante in tutti noi è conosciuto; noi abbiamo tutti una, alcune sono madre, tutti hanno storie-di-madri. Ma che ogni donna sia *definita dalla maternità* all'interno di un sistema patriarcale è un'esperienza politica, di genere e un campo di studio accademico (Rich, 2021/1976). La motivazione per il mio studio è stata la convinzione di Raphael-Leff che questo sia ancora sotto-esplorato dall'accademia (2010b). La politica della maternità è anche di interesse personale, nata dalla mia storia sociale e familiare, e più recentemente, dalla scomparsa del mio matrimonio e la mia intenzione di trarne qualche senso. Soltanto tramite la soggettivazione, le madri diventano esseri umani con sfumature, piuttosto che un gruppo stereotipico di oggetti visti tramite una lente patriarcale (Rich, 2021/1976). Credo che le madri-soggetti sono nate donna, e una storia alla volta. L'auto/biografia come 'orientamento epistemologico e approccio metodologico' (Parsons & Chappell, 2020: 289) tratta spesso la politica dell'epistemologia, della metodologia, della riflettività, della posizione, e del potere. Affronterò questo studio dunque da una posizione di femminista, di costruzionista sociale, d'auto/biografia, di narrazione per sentire le voci di alcune madri-soggetti e utilizzarle accademicamente in maniera etica. La mia posizione costruita socialmente ha un impatto significativo su come viene configurata la mia identità e sulle conoscenze che creo tramite questo studio (Misawa, 2010). Perché la mia è un'agenda politica femminista, faccio valere la mia posizione tramite il racconto della mia propria vita. Racconto anche la storia della città di Reggio Emilia and dell'Approccio Reggio Emilia, che costituiscono lo sfondo del mio studio. Costruisco il mio studio su alcuni dei principi fondamentali della filosofia reggiana, cioè il costruzionismo sociale, la voce narrativa, la politica dell'epistemologia, le teorie ecosistemiche e di complessità e l'interdisciplinarietà. Oltre a me come ricercatrice e partecipante a tutti gli effetti, includo anche otto altre madri come partecipanti di ricerca nei dibattiti di gruppo e nei compiti scritti. Tratto la fase di raccolta dati dall'ottica del tema generale dell'identità materna, ma senza un'agenda aggiuntiva. L'effetto di questa stretta costruzione sociale è che il gruppo guida il processo, e i dati mi guidano verso i temi su cui si costruisce questa tesi. Utilizzo tre dataset, vale a dire, le trascrizioni letterali delle riunioni dei partecipanti della ricerca, i compiti scritti dei

partecipanti della ricerca, e il diario personale riflessivo che ho compilato nel corso dello studio. Utilizzo i dati per fare un'analisi tematica del contenuto, descrivere i caratteri degli altri partecipanti della ricerca, creare poesia a forma libera e io-poesia, e per scrivere le storie polifoniche di caratteri composti. Cerco di definire ed esplorare i tre modi in cui il campo-madre viene generalmente diviso, cioè, la madre (come titolo e identità come una costruzione sociale), la cura materna (l'esperienza e i compiti di una madre, compresa la divisione di genere del lavoro, il carico mentale della madre, "allomothering" [la cura materna prestata da qualcuno non-madre] e la gerarchia della maternità), e la maternità (come istituzione patriarcale). Il primo dei due temi principali tratto dai dati è l'ambivalenza materna. Prendo in esame il dilemma che la psicoanalisi tradizionale ha creato per le madri che vogliono la propria vita e carriera, e che vogliono anche far crescere i loro figli per diventare adulti altamente funzionanti (Hrdy, 2000). Tratto questo argomento nei confronti del mito della *Madonna-Prostituta*, della mitologia politica – e sacrale, la scelta di diventare madre – o meno, e la concorrenza dei vari ruoli della madre fra il tempo, lo sforzo e il denaro. Il secondo dei due temi principali include le norme e le aspettative sociali- nonché intra-psichici, il giudizio, e la punizione, la disobbedienza e la trasgressione, e la possibilità della libertà personale. Questo mio studio contribuisce all'accademia – e in modo particolare, anche all'auto/biografia come approccio e modalità di ricerca – con l'aggiunta di storie-madri soggettive aneddotiche. Offro anche delle riflessioni sul valore dell'*écriture feminine* (Cixous, 1976), lavoro in modo creativo con i dati e creo un casuale processo di gruppo psicoterapeutico. È la mia intenzione che i lettori, tramite qualche identificazione proiettiva con le storie di altre madri e l'ascolto delle voci soggettive di madri, possono anche trarre beneficio dalla lettura del testo.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Auto/Biografia; Maternità; Identità Materna; Costruzione Sociale; Interdisciplinarietà.

CAMPO DELLA TESI

Studi della Maternità; Studi del Genere; Ricerca Qualitativa; Auto/Biografia.

SETTORE SCIENTIFICO

Interdisciplinarietà: Sociologia, Filosofia Femminista, Psicoanalisi.



Untitled
Paris Mia McKay
London, 2024

For Bessie, Sofia, and Peter

*You who come
before and after
above and below
in my complex mother-system*

I owe this story to you.

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For helping me to mentalise my own through your radically respectful approach to all children. For granting me the opportunity and supporting me financially to do this study. Being kept away from the city of Reggio Emilia during Covid-19 will forever be my loss.

Co-participants – here I will also call you by your chosen pseudonyms – Jackie, Nadine, Simone, May Thato, Mae, Tryfina, Veronica, Cecilia:

For finding, wrenching, spilling your guts and pushing yourselves beyond boundaries and understanding. For not sending me to hell when you realised exactly what I was asking of you. For sitting at my table.

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For knowing what I mean. And for your password.

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For inviting me in, gallons of coffee, theoretical contributions, and academic writing skills.

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All the mothers and fathers in my practice:

For trusting me with your stories.

The Oracle:

For giving and taking dreams as You deem necessary. (Phew, okay, you can pause now).

A FEW NOTES

On the font:

I have used Helvetica font, 12-point size throughout the text. Helvetica was designed in 1957 by Swiss type designer Max Miedinger, 'leaving a lasting mark on design and typography' (Visual Hierarchy, n. d.). Modern postwar designers aimed to strip away unnecessary details and move away from any reminders of the past. Miedinger accomplished this with his clean, elegant font. In my thesis, as in most areas of my life, I am constantly oscillating between the beauty of opulent handwriting and the elegance of a minimalist font. In using Helvetica, I (for a moment) give in to the latter.

On Language Editing:

I did not correct any English language mistakes from the research participant meeting transcripts and the participants' writing tasks. Five of the nine research participants speak English as a second or third language, and I chose to keep their dialects to be true to their voices.

On English:

I am using UK English spelling throughout the document. However, I did not change the spelling where US English is used in a direct quote from the research participants or the literature.

On the Comma:

I use the Oxford comma throughout in general arguments. My use of commas is inconsistent in my creative writing, depending on the tone I wish to create. I often omit commas to create urgency or flow, or over-use them for a staccato effect. I smiled when I saw H el ene Cixous – who had become one of my muses during this study – does the same.

On the Use of First Names:

For secondary sources that I only use once (as theoretical contributions, e.g. to help with definitions of certain terms), I do not use first names. For thinkers who contribute

substantially to my argumentation, I use first names with surnames only the first time they appear in the text. I pay tribute to the great ones who shape the development of my mind and my story, by repeating their first names elsewhere in the text. I do not underestimate the reader with the first names of Darwin, Freud, etcetera. Here and there I deviate from these rules for the sake of readability.

ABBREVIATIONS

BSA:	British Sociological Association
EAGT:	Egyptian Association for Group Therapies and Processes
FRC:	Fondazione Reggio Children – Centro Loris Malaguzzi
IAGP:	International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Process
REA:	Reggio Emilia Approach
RP(s):	Research Participant(s)
RPM(s):	Research Participant Meeting(s)
RPM1:	Research Participant Meeting 1
RPM2:	Research Participant Meeting 2
RPM3:	Research Participant Meeting 3
RPM4:	Research Participant Meeting 4
RPM5:	Research Participant Meeting 5
UNIMORE:	University of Modena and Reggio Emilia
WT(s):	Writing Task(s)
WT1:	Writing Task 1
WT2:	Writing Task 2
WT3:	Writing Task 3
WT4:	Writing Task 4
WT5:	Writing Task 5

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CHAPTER 1: ON MOTHER

1. INTRODUCING MOTHER

'I did not choose this subject; it had long ago chosen me' (Rich, 2021/1976: lxiii).

I undertook my research under the auspices of and with financial support from The Reggio Children's Foundation, or *Fondazione Reggio Children – Centro Loris Malaguzzi* (FRC) in collaboration with the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UNIMORE) in northern Italy. It all started when I read a paper at the Egyptian Association for Group Therapies and Processes (EAGT) conference, a regional subsection of the International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Process (IAGP) in the Egyptian winter of 2020. Many delegates had to withdraw on short notice because of heavy bouts of influenza, some saw the conference through despite coughing- and sneezing fits and high fevers. Towards the end of the conference, I went for a glass of shabby local red in Al Khalifa wal Moqattam on the outskirts of Cairo (only on the less religious outskirts could one get hold of alcohol) with a FRC faculty member. I had met her before and did not know at the time that she had enjoyed my paper enough to invite me to apply for a scholarship to do this doctoral study. I turned down her invitation – I had a husband and two little children, all settled in Johannesburg, South Africa, and I, narrow-mindedly, could not see us uprooting for a few years of studies abroad. Nobody foresaw that the world would come to a complete standstill due to COVID-19 a mere six weeks later, and that the PhD programme would be presented online for the foreseeable future. She contacted me again a week or two before the proposal submission deadline to ask 'where the hell' my proposal was. I was deeply touched by her belief in me, agreed, scrambled to get something together, got it in (incredulously), and so began this endeavour.

I must admit, somewhat sheepishly, that it had never really occurred to me that the broader mother topic is a vast field of study. I rather saw *mother* as the (often opaque) canvas against which all lives are lived. Mother is a constant in us all – whether being or having one, or the absence of one, or otherwise. Stories about having mothers and being mothers, and (less often) about not being mothers have swirled around me ever

since I can remember, and later in my practice room too. I mostly heard that mothers are selfless angels doing mothering without being asked or told to, or that they are self-centred witches for not doing it, or that women who are not mothers should be pitied or shamed. That all women are defined by motherhood (Rich, 2021/1976: xiv), and that mother is therefore a deeply political, gendered field of study dawned on me only when I started reading and writing about the topic.

The field is generally divided into three sections, namely mother as person (as title and identity), mothering (the mothering experience, actions, tasks, the verb), and the institutional status of motherhood (the patriarchal institution). I define mother (title) with the help of Angela Garbes (2022), and through extensive conversations between the research participants (RPs). I largely use Sarah Knott's (2022) definition and Shani Orgad's (2019) descriptions of mothering (verb) in creating my own. In my definition of motherhood as institution I am mainly informed by Adrienne Rich (2021/1976) and Angela Saini (2023).

2. INTRODUCING *MY* VERSION OF MOTHER

2.1 Of Concern

Given how much had been written about mother, I had to wonder why it is still of concern to others as a field of study, and more prominently why it concerns me enough to want to study it even further. What is my specific interest, and how can I contribute to this vast body of knowledge? I remember my own mother as a hands-on, always busy, sometimes overwhelmed home manager, music teacher, and active community member. I remember most of my friends' mothers in the same way – many of them not working, and not all as active in the community as mine, but all of them forever dropping off and fetching children from school, wearing stockings and hats to church, offering orange squash when I came to visit, all playing tennis every Saturday afternoon, and some of them singing in the community choir that my mother conducted. I do not remember imagining myself as a mother until my 18th year when I was a dismal *au pair* to two boys in the Netherlands, and then only in terms of rather not becoming one. (See Chapter 3 for the rest of my story). My interest in maternal

identity – as a personal and social construct – slowly grew with the demise of my 24-year marriage and the difficult, mostly opaque, gender role negotiations related to the parenting of our two children. I suppose it was because of a classical mid-life crisis that I decided to dedicate a doctoral study to my dilemma. But how I could contribute to the academy and to other women's stories with mine, still needed answering.

2.2 The Dilemma

Classical analysis places a basic expectation on mothers to be *good enough* (Winnicott, 1964). But what do mothers need to be good enough in the Winnicottian sense, and what does society see as a good enough mother, for the child to become a highly functioning adult? In my study, and this thesis, I address this dilemma created by classical analysis for mothers who want to raise emotionally sound, highly functioning children and who also want lives and careers of their own (Hrdy, 2000); of society's intolerance of maternal negative- or ambivalent feelings, the social as well as intrapsychic judgement and punishment that follow, and what personal freedom amidst this setup could be. Even though contemporary psychoanalysis and feminism have done tremendous work, this field is still under-explored in academia (Raphael-Leff, 2010b). This dearth, in combination with my desire to make meaning of my own story and those of other mothers, is the motivation for my study.

2.3 The Approach

It is only in the subjectivation of mothers, in hearing their personal stories, that mothers become normal, nuanced women rather than a group of objects (Rich, 2021/1976). I believe this subjectivation can only grow one personal story at a time, and the way in which I approach it is through a feminist, social constructionist, auto/biographic, narrative study in which I am led by the data – personal stories co-created with eight other mothers – into places unknown to me before. A significant difference between 'traditional and feminist approaches is the insistence' that participation in a research study should create value for the research participants and the researcher (Twinley & Letherby, 2022: 7), that it should create value for, and speak on behalf of a larger group of people (Ellis et al., 2010), and that it should lead to some form of change

(Twinley & Letherby, 2022). To me, this means that if I am to practice my belief that subjectivation of mothers happens one story at a time, I should invite mothers to tell their stories anecdotally and in writing, and that these narratives and writings should benefit the participants and others. (See Chapter 8 for the participants' contemplations of value creation after their participation).

2.4 So What, and How?

With my study I mainly wish to contribute (albeit humbly) in two areas, namely methodologically and with unique content.

2.4.1 Content

As mentioned above, it is through the co-creation of personal stories that my study helps society to subjectify a few mothers, and on behalf of a larger group of mothers (Ellis et al., 2010). It helps society to learn more about the dilemma created by classical analysis that is still, to a large degree, supported by patriarchal institution. In my study I use *anecdote* to create embodied people out of a generalised collective, and I challenge the so-called norm one example at a time.

2.4.2 Methodology

With my methodological approach I challenge the convention of research question followed by literature review followed by data collection followed by confirmation of the literature through the data – I challenge confirmation bias. In being true to social constructionism, I do it the other way around. I am led by the primary data without any prior agenda, not knowing where it would lead me. I use the data in a number of creative ways; a process of slowly weaving my thesis from group conversation transcripts, participants' creative writing tasks, free-form poetry, I-poetry, polyphonic compound characters' stories, and my own reflective journal. In this way I am bringing my own story and those of a few other mothers, in our own voices, into the academy. As mentioned above, an added value lies in the mere participation in the study.

3. INTRODUCING THE MENU

I commence Chapter 2 with an introduction of the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA), including a short history, a discussion on the fundamental principles of the philosophy, and how it forms the background to my study. I further discuss my feminist approach and how I use it interdisciplinarily. In Chapter 3 I tell my life story to disclaim my positionality as researcher. Chapter 4 is a discussion on my methodological approach, an introduction to the RPs, and a step-by-step guide to the research design. Chapter Four-Plus-a-Bit *or* Five-Minus-Some offers a short pause before the data chapters. In Chapter 5, the first of the themed data chapters, I define motherhood as institution, mother as a title, and mothering as a verb. I further discuss the division of labour and the hierarchy of motherhood. I discuss the second theme, maternal ambivalence, in Chapter 6. I firstly introduce the concept of maternal ambivalence, then I explore political- and sacral mythmaking in the mother story, and I think about the choice – or not – to be a mother. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on some of the other roles that mothers play (working mother/student mother, school mom, and mother-lover), and the demand on time, effort, and money from each role. In Chapter 7 I address the third theme, namely social as well as intrapsychic judgement, punishment, and disobedience/transgression. I end the chapter with a discussion on social and personal freedom; that freedom can be obtained through motherhood, separation between mother and child, happy marriage/divorce, reality checks, and through new perspectives. I conclude my thesis with Chapter 8; which includes a contemplation on the study's contributions regarding the command to write, theory, methodology, the value of participation, and potential value to the reader. I discuss the shortfalls of my study, and the possibility for further research on racial and skills-based silencing in the RP group, and on the potential for a psychoanalysis of the data, and group psychotherapy. In conclusion, I meditate on the personal value of creating and participating in this study.

CHAPTER 2: THE CANVAS

1. INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 1 I noted that I am doing this study under the auspices of and with financial support from the FRC in collaboration with UNIMORE. I take the social constructionist approach to my study from Reggio Emilia's story. From my mother and my children, my mother story was born. From Reggio Emilia and from Reggio Children, my mother story-study came to life. With gratitude. Therefore, I find it important to start this chapter with a short history and background of the city of Reggio Emilia, and to continue with the fundamental principles of the Reggio philosophy. I divide these principles into subsections on social constructionism, the narrative voice and the importance of own stories, auto/biography as research approach and method, the politics of epistemology, ecosystemic- and complexity theories, and interdisciplinarity. I explain my use of each principle throughout the discussion, and I end the chapter with a short introduction to the main feminist and other theoretical sources that I use extensively throughout my study.

2. THE REA AND MY STUDY

2.1 A History

It is against the following historical canvas that I understand the REA, and it is from within the REA that I study maternal identity as a social construct.

American psychologist Jerome Bruner, 'close friend and admirer' as well as honorary citizen of the city of Reggio Emilia, argues that one cannot understand the Reggio Emilia educational system without understanding the city (Bruner in Dahlberg & Moss, 2006: xiv). Bruner describes Reggio, a city in the Emilia-Romagna region of Northern Italy with an ethnically diverse population of 171 000, as 'neither confusingly large, nor suffocatingly small, and of a size that favours imagination, energy, community spirit' (ibid.: xiv-xv). 'What struck me in Reggio Emilia was seeing how imagination was cultivated there, reinforcing the children's sense of the possible. It was the expression of something profoundly rooted in the city ... Because in Reggio one is given to

meeting a rare form of courtesy, a precious form of reciprocal respect' (ibid.: 190). Within the city of Reggio lies the origin and roots of the REA System. The REA System comprises 33 infant-toddler centres (*nidi*, for children between three months and three years) and preschools (*scuole dell'infanzia*, for children from three to six years), and the umbrella body Reggio Children – 'a unique body of theory and practice about working with young children and their families, produced from a very particular historical, cultural, and political context' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006: xiv). Reggio Children was formally founded in 1994 to promote the pedagogical and cultural exchanges that were already happening between the Reggio municipality early childhood centres and teachers, and academics and researchers from all over the world. The FRC was established in 2011 under Reggio Children, with the aim of organising and hosting solidarity research projects and creating interdependence between Reggio Emilia, the REA, and a world-wide academic community (see Dahlberg & Moss, 2006: 192-195 for a detailed explanation of the REA System).

Reggio has a pre-war socialist history stretching back to 1899. Between 1922 and 1943, the government was led by Mussolini and his totalitarian fascist regime, and Reggio was totally liberated only in April 1945. Before Mussolini's totalitarian suppression, Reggio's socialist administration was in the forefront of educational development. All socialist educational developments, for example summer camps and music schools, were closed under fascist administration, and Reggio was reduced to privately funded schools and charitable educational institutions. The Emilia-Romagna Region and the city of Reggio were heavily bombed during the Second World War, and after 1945 the people of this city set about to rebuild their society, lives, and city on the foundations of freedom from oppression, injustice, and inequality. Cooperative movements were founded, and by selling a tank, three trucks, and some war horses, women and men of all ages used the money from these sales and building materials from bombed buildings to erect the first school on a local farmer's land in Villa Cella, just outside Reggio. The post-war years in the city was a time, as in the rest of northern Italy and many parts of Europe, of structural, economic, cultural, and political renewal. With the multi-level developments of this era, migration, urbanisation, and consumerism 'produced a growing atomisation of civil society with an accompanying

isolation of families' (Cagliari et al., 2016: 5). The nuclear family became increasingly more important as well as more isolated and solitary, 'less open to community life or to forms of inter-family solidarity' (ibid.).

Reggio gained a democratic local government after the war, with successive Socialist-Communist administrations. Yet, it was only towards the later 1950's that the local administration started paying heed to the needs of women and children. Private organisations, in turn, took early initiatives, for example after-school centres and summer camps, in this regard. The local government faced national constraints in the development of their own services, as the central government held strong control over local municipal affairs. Municipalities, for example, had limited budgets for early childhood service development, and were urged to submit to Catholic church-run institutions. During this time women became a powerful force in the development of early childhood services. It was also during this time that Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), a primary school teacher, became an important figure behind the new educational system and the development of the REA. Malaguzzi heard about the Villa Cella school built by the people and was so inspired by this story that he studied psychology in an attempt to understand very young children and became a leader in the parent cooperative movement. Malaguzzi also influenced the city in setting up privately managed schools, following Villa Cella. 1962 was a turning point; women's employment and the provision of public services were debated. Christian Democrats argued for part-time employment of mothers, whereas left-wing politicians argued for full-time employment of mothers and early childhood services for their children. The latter course won the Reggio vote, and the first municipal preschool for three to six year-olds opened in 1963. This was the birth of the Reggio early childhood education project: the local community taking responsibility for the education of their children, as well as challenging the dominance of the Catholic church in this field. Malaguzzi, the first pedagogical director of the Reggio municipal schools, is described by Carlina Rinaldi, current president of FRC, as 'one of the greatest pedagogical thinkers and practitioners of the last century' (2021: xvii). Malaguzzi emphasised in a series of interviews between 1989 and 1991 (Edwards et al., 2012), the establishment of these early schools as an important landmark:

It affirmed for the first time in Italy the people claiming the right to found a secular school for young children – a rightful and necessary break in the monopoly the Catholic church had hitherto exercised over children's early education. It was a necessary change in a society that was renewing itself and changing deeply and in which citizens and families ... wanted schools of a new kind: of better quality, free from charitable tendencies, not merely custodial, and not discriminatory in any way (Malaguzzi, 2012: 31).

Elsewhere ethical and political dimensions have become neglected issues in education (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006). Instead of seeing education as a right of minor citizens and a responsibility within a democratic society, education is increasingly approached as commodity within competing markets, with parents as consumers who measure schooling against:

Delivery, quality, excellence and outcomes. The school is reduced to a site of technical practice, to be evaluated against its ability to reproduce knowledge and identity and to achieve uniform and consistent criteria. The school has become a technology of normalisation (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006: xv).

It is in this context that I understand the REA as a way to continuously build education as a place of encounter and connection, interaction and dialogue amongst citizens, younger and older, living together in a community. 'Behind every solution and every organisation, this means behind every school, there is a choice of values and ethics' (ibid.: xvi). I pose that this idea includes the home with its childrearing and parenting practices. (See Cagliari, et al., 2016; Rinaldi, 2021; Edwards et al., 2012 for more detailed histories of Reggio Emilia).

2.2 The Fundamental Principles of the Reggio Philosophy

As mentioned above, my study is greatly influenced by the fundamental principles of the Reggio philosophy. This philosophy was developed under the influence of theorists and philosophers from within a wide arena, resulting in a complex systemic interdisciplinarity. Some of the REA's most important influencers are Lev Vygotsky (socio-cultural theory of child development, social constructivism), Urie Bronfenbrenner (ecological systems theory), Howard Gardner (theory of multiple intelligences), Jean Piaget (theory of cognitive development), Jerome Bruner (theory of learning and cognitive development, the narrative voice, social constructivism), John Dewey (democracy in education, epistemology), and several ecosystemic/cybernetic/complex theorists (Bateson, von Foerster, Maturana and Varela, amongst others).

Because of my view on the motherhood institution as a complex social system, I realised early in my study that I cannot but approach it politically, and that it requires explicitly subjective, first-person interrogations from an interdisciplinary perspective. This approach is complimented by the REA philosophy. What follows are sections on concepts shared between the REA philosophy and my study, namely social constructionism, narrative voice and own stories, auto/biography, the politics of epistemology, ecosystemic- and complexity theories, and interdisciplinarity.

2.2.1 Constructing the World

'Getting to know the world is not just perceiving something; it's constructing it' (Xu, 2019: 590). Under the influence of Vygotsky, Bruner developed a social constructivist theory of meaning according to which he believes that an interpersonal, intersubjective, collaborative process of creating shared meaning is a prerequisite for meaningful participation in social groups, as well as for the meaningful use of language (1986, 1990, 2004). Bruner follows Vygotsky's premise that humans learn best in social environments where we construct meaning through interaction with others. He writes that we are forever constructing and reconstructing a self to accommodate our changing situations, with 'the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears of the future', and that this results in the stories we tell about ourselves (Bruner

cited by Parsons & Chappell, 2020: 102). According to Bruner, ‘world making’ is the primary task of human minds, and autobiography – a set of procedures for ‘life making’ – are increasingly understood as social constructs (2004: 691-692). As seen later in this chapter, this premise is strongly echoed in auto/biography as research approach (Davidson & Letherby, 2020; Letherby 2015), as well as in the notion of a polyphonic first-person voice (Tokarczuk, 2019), and the mind as complex systemic co-creation of a lifetime of influences (Bateson, 1972; Gardner, 2020; Casement, 2002).

In the 1970’s the REA started experimenting with what it would mean to work from the idea that ‘children’s learning is situated in a socio-cultural context and takes place in inter-relationships, requiring the construction of an environment that allows for maximum movement, interdependence, and interaction’ (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006: xix). Within this experiment the REA adopted Vygotsky’s social constructivist perspective. He believes in ‘peers as pedagogical tools in the process of co-construction’ (Rinaldi, 2021: xix. For more on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of cognitive development, see Vygotsky, 1978; Newman & Holzman, 1993). In the REA, knowledge creation is seen as constituted in a social context through a process of meaning-making in continuous encounters with others and the world; child and teacher are both seen as co-constructors, co-creators, of knowledge and culture (Mineo, 2021; Rinaldi, 2021). In choosing to adopt a social constructionist approach, the REA is also ‘challenging and deconstructing dominant discourses’, and blatantly stating how the power of these discourses is ‘shaping and governing our thoughts and actions’ (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006: xx).

Rejecting the prescription of rules, goals, methods and standards ... having the courage to think for themselves in constructing new discourses, and in so doing daring to make the choice of understanding the child as a rich child, a child of infinite capabilities, a child born with a hundred languages; building a new pedagogical project, foregrounding relations and encounters, dialogue and negotiation, reflection and critical thinking; border crossing

disciplines and perspectives, replacing either/or positions with an and/also openness; and understanding the contextualized and dynamic nature of pedagogical practice, which problematizes the idea of a transferrable programme (ibid.).

The constructivist and social constructionist approaches to research allow for great understanding of how variables at the level of the individual in their unique situations or contexts, as well as on a societal level, can combine to construct personal and parental identity (Murnen, 2015). From the above, complimented by Bateson (1972), Gardner (2020), Casement (2002), Adichie (2009), Tokarczuk (2019), and auto/biography as research approach (Letherby, 2003; Parsons & Chappell, 2020), it is clear to me that an enquiry into the personal and maternal identities of myself and the other RPs with very diverse stories and contexts, and the contributing contextual factors to our identity formations, should be researched from a social constructionist perspective.

Note: *Constructivism* is defined as the idea that knowledge and reality are constructed within individuals (what happens in the minds and brains of individuals). *Social constructionism's* idea is that knowledge and reality are constructed socially through discourse and conversation (what happens between people). Both constructivism and social constructionism pose a subjective view of reality and knowledge creation (Sommers-Flanagan, 2015). Constructivism and social constructionism are often used interchangeably in the literature, and constructivism is sometimes referred to as social constructivism. For my study, I use Bruner's constructivism (often referred to as social constructivism). I support social constructionism in my research approach, so I am using these terms interchangeably.

2.2.2 Narrative Voice and Own Stories

Bruner argues that there are two modes of cognitive functioning: the logico-scientific mode and the narrative mode (Bruner, 1986; Rutten & Soetaert, 2013). Whereas the

logico-scientific mode looks for universal and empirically tested truths, with no contradictions, the narrative mode searches for the intentionality of human actions in the context within which it takes place. Therefore, from the narrative mode truth is understood as contextual. In his general theory of culture, mind, and education, Bruner (1986) asks how culture shapes the minds of individuals in such a way that they become typical members of their social groups. He believes that one of the primary ways is through the stories – whether they be truth or fiction – that we tell and listen to (ibid.).

That there are truths to be found in stories is inarguable. Similarly, there is always an element of interpretation in research, and every written text is a product of particular social, political, technical, economic and personal events. At the same time, however, I would argue against going so far as to say that there are no ultimate differences between fact and fiction, truth and story. The lines may be blurred of course; however, as a fiction writer, I invent events and participants (Frank, 2000: 484-485).

Throughout my life, there have been many pivotal moments when new elements were introduced into my ecosystem (by myself, by others, by chance); surprise encounters that lead to significant changes, or turning points, in my story. Lexie Scherer and Amanda Norman refer to Denzin's description of 'our minor, illuminative epiphanies', and that those moments can lead to 'minor or major personal, or social transformations for the individual' (2023: 6). I believe the elements that had to come together for me to write this study at FRC at this stage of my motherhood story, with this supervisor, and with this group of participants, is almost like saying all the stars had to be in perfect alignment. There have been a few pivotal moments though that are worth mentioning: incidentally reading Rollo May's *The Courage to Create* (1975) before I had the courage to write a paper for an international conference where I re-met a woman who believed in me, who nagged me, and who eventually convinced me to apply for this

scholarship; early in my study incidentally reading Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) in which she commands women to write themselves into existence (that was after an FRC lecture on Bruner's social constructivism); incidentally hearing mention of Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) in an introductory FRC lecture on complexity theory – the same Bateson I read during my undergraduate years in an ecosystemic psychology school and have since rated as one of my favourites of all time; incidentally attending an online autoethnography conference in July 2021 while looking for a supervisor, and meeting my supervisor there; and sometime during all these incidental happenings meeting someone, whom I call my first reader, who unequivocally believes in my voice and in me. Together, these 'illuminative epiphanies' (Scherer & Norman, 2023: 6) morphed into a new chapter in my story, and opened the floodgates of my mind, my pen, and my mouth.

In her 2018 Nobel Peace Prize in Literature acceptance speech, Olga Tokarczuk, said:

We live in a reality of polyphonic first-person narratives, and we are met from all sides with polyphonic noise. What I mean by first-person is the kind of tale that narrowly orbits the self of a teller who more or less directly just writes about herself and through herself. We have determined that this type of individualized point of view, this voice from the self, is the most natural, human and honest, even if it does abstain from a broader perspective. Narrating in the first person, so conceived, is weaving an absolutely unique pattern, the only one of its kind; it is having a sense of autonomy as an individual, being aware of yourself and your fate (The Nobel Foundation, 2019).

The idea that our first-person narratives are our own, yet informed by an intricate web of other voices, experiences, times, contexts, is nothing new. Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), Patrick Casement's *Learning from Life* (2002), Jerome

Bruner's *Life as Narrative* (2004), Jeanette Winterson's *Why be Happy When You Could be Normal?* (2013), and Howard Gardner's *A Synthesizing Mind* (2020) come to mind. These are a few examples of exceptional minds who, as part of their theoretical approaches, acknowledge the complex web that informed them throughout their lives, that formed their minds. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), warns against the claim that our own stories, our unique approaches, are the only ones, as in this single story there is 'no possibility of a connection as human equals'. *The personal is political* (for example Hanisch cited by Parsons & Chappell, 2020; Letherby, 1994, 2015), therefore the telling of single, definitive stories about others without self-reflection, disclosure of one's own position, and feedback from others, is the continuation of a story of political power. I acknowledge that I am partly telling my own story through this study, and with deep gratitude towards the entire intricate web of other voices, experiences, times, contexts. The part-guarantee that I have for not telling a single story, warned against by Adichie (2009) above, is my frequent critical reflective journal writings, my self-disclosure and positionality statement in this thesis, and the feedback from the other RPs, my supervisor, my first reader, my mother, my brother, and some.

In an attempt at closer connection with the reader, and as part of the auto/biographic approach, I am using my own storytelling voice in this study, following what Bruner calls 'the narrative construction of reality' (Stoller, 2014). An important element of Bruner's narrative approach is that narratives, or stories, can emphasise universal human vulnerabilities. They can accentuate our fears about how we 'confront misfortune, illness, uncertainty, and death' and they can connect us with fellow human beings (Stoller, 2014: 467. Also see Letherby, 2015). The narrative voice used in my study is complimented by the gender existentialist consideration of *auto*/biography as an imperative to understanding the writer (Dragseth, 2015), and Cixous' unique genre of *l'écriture féminine*, or female writing (Cixous, 1976; Sellers, 1994, 2007).

What brings about some discomfort throughout my writing, is the experience of my first-person voice as subjective researcher, participant, narrator, auto/biographic writer leaving me exposed and vulnerable; not in the knowing, powerful position that I may

have assumed if I were to write as a so-called expert, objective researcher. Aberasturi-Apraiz et al. speak about 'The reflectivity of discomfort' as a 'strategy for coping with not knowing' as well as their initial not knowing where they are heading (2020: 2). They see their researcher stance as a revelation of these uncertainties. In this uncertainty, this exploration, I am strangely starting to hear my own voice, and the voices of other uncertain mothers, as existentially useful storied material for a wider mother-population.

Sound-voice

the unhindered sounds of

an African fish eagle

a night jar

Pell's fishing owl

a lapwing pair

the fall of every drop

in togetherness

of a crystal clear waterfall.

Invasions of

a siren

cars rushing by

the neighbour's cat overstepping the line.

The voices of the people that I read:

Cixous

Beauvoir

Bruner

Freud.

And somewhere in between also

birthing voices of

the mothers

*struggling with identity –
amongst them also
me
myself
the mother
I.*

2.2.3 Auto/Biography

In my positioning statement in Chapter 3, I express my privilege and freedom in terms of education, race, finances, life philosophy, gender, sexual orientation, and sexuality. Despite my positionality on all these levels, I have always felt that I was never granted a right of existence in the psychoanalytic community that I found myself in; that I did not feel I had a right of existence from, or because of, *my positionality* in my professional-academic environment. Misawa (2010) believes that all aspects of our identities are moulded by our socially constructed positions and the memberships we hold, and that this idea means our automatic categorisation embedded in our social systems, pervasive through all areas of our lives. Misawa cites Maher and Tetreault in defining positionality as the idea that ‘people are defined not in terms of fixed identities, but by their location within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analysed and changed’ (2010: 26). Misawa argues that one’s positionality, ‘the power inherent in one’s immediate respective special positions’, greatly influences what one has access to in society (ibid.). In other words, the general socio-political agreement is that one’s positionality also grants or silences one’s voice within a specific context. I believe my search for an academic voice and my potential for free expression was, for multiple reasons, stifled in the psychoanalytic community that I knew, and I found a home in the auto/biography research community.

I recall a dinner-table conversation about my planned study with a close friend some years ago. She is a seasoned academic, and her advice to me was: ‘If you ever want to complete this study, you need to know that it is not about you. It needs to be an academic contribution to knowledge, so keep your story, your own voice, out of it’. I was wondering why an academic contribution should necessarily exclude my story

and my voice, but I did not yet have the theory to argue the point. Although I doubted myself, a question was gnawing at the back of my mind. I have never managed to find a so-called objective academic voice that sounded like it was authentically mine. I have always told stories, even when writing and talking about theory. Suddenly I was wondering how I possibly could have thought that I can contribute academically as the result of a difficult phase in my personal life. Was I wrong in assuming that my story could partly also be the story of other mothers, and that it could even be part of a larger cultural story? I read Bruner (1986, Stoller, 2014), Letherby (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Letherby, 2015; Letherby & Davidson, 2015); Ellis et al. (2010), Maguire (2004, 2006), Parsons and Chappell (2020) to search for – and find – the value of own stories; of using a first person, narrative voice.

Michael Brennan and Gayle Letherby (2017) define *auto/biography* as a study within which the researcher focuses on their own story with the acknowledgement of others' stories, but in reference to their own. An *auto/biographic* study's main concern would be with the researcher's life experiences and the meanings and interpretations they attach to them. An *auto/biography* would be when the researcher writes about, or tells the stories of their RPs, while also acknowledging their own subjective position as narrator-researcher. My study, on which this thesis reports, stems from my life story; an *auto/biographical* study, morphing into an *auto/biography* when focusing on the other participants' stories, and back to my own *auto/biography*; a dialogue between *auto/-* and *-/biography*. In citing Denzin and Lincoln, Letherby (2015) states that all our writing is in some way *auto/biography* with traces of ourselves and our personal statements, within which we as writers work from ourselves to others and back to ourselves. I believe this to be true of my study.

As a research method, *auto/biography* is a process and a product: 'a method and a text', 'a noun and a verb', 'both an epistemological orientation and a methodological approach' (Parsons & Chappell, 2020: 1, 3, 289). It wishes to describe and systematically analyse individuals' personal experiences in an attempt to understand something of the larger cultural experiences, and of the settings and times that they live in (Ellis et al., 2010). David Morgan, a founding member of the British Sociological

Association (BSA), Auto/Biography Study Group, says that ‘in writing another’s life we also write or rewrite our own lives; in writing about ourselves we also consider ourselves as somebody different from the person who routinely and unproblematically inhabits and moves through social space and time’ (Parsons & Chappell, 2020: 4). Letherby compliments Morgan in stating that our research work is ‘more honest’ and ‘more useful’ if we start with the subjective and clearly disclose our position throughout the research process (2015: 137). She shows a commitment throughout her work to *theorised subjectivity* (Letherby, 2003, 2013), as punted in feminist Carol Hanish’s 1970 essay with the same title, *the personal is political* (Parsons & Chappell, 2020; Letherby, 1994, 2015). Of course, not all auto/biography is feminist, but auto/biography often leans heavily on Hanish’s credo, and therefore epistemology, methodology, reflectivity, positionality, and power are often addressed in auto/biographical work (Parsons & Chappell, 2020).

Although auto/biography is not mentioned as a fundamental principle of the Reggio philosophy, it supports, and is supported by social constructionism, the narrative voice, politics of epistemology, as well as ecosystemic- and complexity theories, and interdisciplinarity. Through this overlap I believe I am making an academic contribution to knowledge through my part-story and my own voice, as well as through the co-construction of the other RPs’ stories.

2.2.4 Politics of Epistemology

Because of its social constructionist approach, the REA is involved in the politics of epistemology, or in Dewey’s preferred term, theories of knowledge (2001/1916); opposing the modernistic idea that knowledge is ‘an objective representation of a real world’ (Rinaldi, 2021: xxiii). The key to the naturalistic account of species was in Darwin’s view ‘a consideration of the complex interrelationships between organisms and environments’ (Field, n. d.). In following Darwin’s view, Dewey believed that a useful approach to the creation of knowledge must consider, firstly, the creation of knowledge ‘as an adaptive human response to environing conditions aimed at an active restructuring of these conditions’ (ibid., para. 16). He understood thought as the outcome of an interaction between an organism (the human mind) and its

environment. This theory of knowledge implied that the mind does not passively perceive and therefore get to know the environment, but rather ‘active manipulation of the environment is involved integrally in the process of learning from the start’ (ibid.). The REA, greatly influenced by Dewey, sees knowledge as an interpretation of a constantly evolving reality, socially constructed by each one of the protagonists in relationships with others. In this view the importance of context is clear; the REA sees learning as not linear, not determined and deterministic. They negate question and answer patterns, universality, simple judgements, so-called correct ideas, and predetermined goals (Mineo, 2021). The REA [opens] up for the exploration of alternative and marginalized ways to think and give meanings to the world in which subjectivity, surprise, amazement and openness to doubt are all important values’ (Rinaldi, 2021: xxiii). Data collection, research methodology – in other words knowledge creation – is clearly deeply political. In my study this stance complements the feminist philosophy: mothers telling their stories from an auto/biographical approach and in a narrative voice, in dialogue with each other around the table as well as in the participants’ writings.

2.2.5 Ecosystemic and Complexity Theories

Reflective Journal (March 2024)

Fresh mountain-stream water, the Morningstar, dappled light and fractals, the opera and Schubert’s Winterreise, drama school, tortoiseshell spectacle frames, wild hair, a disregard for nonsensical rules, (uhm, a disregard for most rules), the Oracle at Delphi, a dream journal, wanderlust, sensuousness, sensuality, varicose veins and sagging boobs, a daughter and a son, a failed marriage, a desire to be free from social judgement, a desire to be acceptable and accepted, academic endeavours, books and books, an unquenchable thirst and unbeatable capacity for talking things through, freshly ground coffee beans, and lingering. It continues ad infinitum. What these elements have in common is that they are all part of the system called Me. Some of them you will get to know in this thesis, some not. Some are small and some rather large particles that – all together – form an intricate system with no exact beginning and end, no impermeable boundaries, no linearity, interrelated, interconnected, no

conclusive outcome. Contemplated through the lens of ecosystemic theory, and (for me, newly found) complexity theory, this myriad of life-factors interact(s) and live together as one organism, or one life story, within which ‘chaos and stability move in opposite directions’, always towards the maintenance of life (Theise, 2023: 19).

In another story at a different time, aeons ago, possibly a day or so after the founding of the Reformation, Luther gathered his council in a secret gathering place in a vault below the Wittenberg town square. In one sitting they wrote the Patriarchy Manifesto that would guide men – and their wives – until today. But, of course, that is not how it worked. Even though we (RPs) often thought and spoke about the patriarchy as a finely designed, top-down, council of men, with women-and-children second to last, and women-without-children at the very bottom, it is not its nature. It is a colossus of a system with no clear beginning and end, and no simple definition.

I started seeing a complex social system within which the patriarchal motherhood institution constantly evolves; to and from all directions are mothers formed and expected to form into personas that are sometimes difficult to grasp with a single definition. ‘A class of patterns of interactions: open-ended, evolving, unpredictable, yet adaptive and self-sustaining’ (Theise, 2023: 4). In complexity theory (other than in chaos theory where the outcome is predictable), ‘the whole is *unpredictably* greater than the sum of its parts. Kind of like the world. Kind of like our lives’ (ibid.: 22). Kind of like my own life, how I came to my study, how it evolved. In the same systemic, constructionist, ever evolving way that I see mothers, the REA sees the development of children as part of their systems. Rinaldi explains in a chapter titled *The Natural Complexity of Becoming a Child* that:

Every time a child is born, anywhere, in Reggio Emilia and around the world, humankind as a whole, and not just the parents, has the opportunity to be reborn, to renew themselves, to reinvent themselves in terms of identity and hope ... A child is born, a father and mother are born, and ... people are transformed to become parents, something they will never stop being, not

even for one second of their lives. Around them, together with them, a world is born. Desired, dreamed of, feared, adopted, the child ‘generates’ the parents (2021: 171).

One of the REA’s fundamental principles, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, that children express themselves through many different languages beyond the spoken word, clearly speaks to the ecosystemic- and (recently) complexity theories lens through which the REA sees the world. Rinaldi states that Malaguzzi’s idea of knowledge, (following Bateson, Maturana, Varela, Deleuze & Guattari – all with different analogies of eco-/systems) is like ‘a tangle of spaghetti’ (2021: xix); one organism or system where all protagonists and variables have an impact on each other and on the system as a whole ‘through contemporaneous advances, standstills, and retreats that take many directions’ (ibid.). Like Dewey who was influenced by Darwin, second-order cyberneticist Heinz Von Foerster believes that the roots of second-order cybernetics and later complexity theory – of which we humans are mere parts, is found in the natural sciences and in nature (Mineo, 2021). But the most successful of all scientific theories – quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity – alone are unable to explain ‘how we got from the most basic elements of existence ... to the complex behaviours of living organisms and their social structures: ecosystems, cultures, and civilizations’ (Theise, 2023: 5). It is through complexity theory that we understand ‘how the entities arising from fundamental physics actively weave themselves into ever larger structures, step by step, until they become the fabric of our everyday lives and of the dynamic, natural, living systems that surround us’ (ibid.). Through my study I have regained a marvel in the complex system that I am part of. I am humbled by life’s complexity, and that ‘in every single instance, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts ... extraordinary properties that emerge from their interactions’ (ibid.: 4).

2.2.6 Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinary study or interdisciplinarity can be defined as ‘the exploration of issues, problems, knowledge, and understanding through the integration and synthesis of ideas, data, theoretical and/or methodological procedures, which draw on more than

one discipline' (Collett, 2022: 25), or simply 'communication and collaboration across academic disciplines' (Jacobs & Frickel, 2009: 44). Tracey Collett describes interdisciplinary academic work with words like 'contested space', 'liminal', 'wicked', 'super complex', 'real world' problems rather than seeking 'universally recognized knowledge' about how the world works (ibid.). She further states that integration is key to interdisciplinarity and distinguishes it from multi- or cross-disciplinary work in which two or more disciplines are juxtaposed. Rinaldi believes that one of the reasons for the REA's 'vigour and longevity' has been because of their willingness to cross disciplinary borders, and to stay curious about new perspectives (2021: xvii). Reggio educators draw theories and concepts from fields including education, philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, architecture, natural sciences, literature, visual communication, fine arts, and more. Rinaldi says that they relate 'their work to an analysis of the wider world and its continuous processes of change' (ibid.).

I was surprised – and very puzzled – when I first met my classmates at the FRC. We were nine fellows in childhood studies of which only three had backgrounds in education; the rest coming from history, art history, music, biology, museum studies, aesthetics, sociology, and psychology. Since my introduction to this rich multidisciplinary learning environment, I never had any doubt about the necessity for an interdisciplinary study on my topic, given its ecosystemic nature and my social constructionist approach to it. Yet, Jacobs and Frickel describe interdisciplinarity as 'lauded as an ideal, scorned as a threat, and embraced as a practice' (2009: 44). In moments of uncertainty or confusion I would describe myself as an ecosystemically-existentially inclined clinical psychologist by training and profession, somewhat of a psychoanalytic thinker through pollination, a quasi-sociological thinker by supervision, a philosopher by fantasy, and, overarchingly, a feminist by life's moulding. My study started in the liminal spaces between all these disciplines, and over time I am seeing how it is morphing into Malaguzzi's 'tangle of spaghetti' (Rinaldi, 2021: xix), never to be dissected back into separateness. In the same way, and at the same time, my mind is expanding and my lens on the world is morphing; I am never to see the world from a single perspective again. Collett closes her chapter with the statement 'individuals can experience heightened uncertainty as they find themselves in a liminal space,

without a map to navigate' (2022: 37). I am deeply indebted to my supervisor (a British sociologist), who mapped out this new territory alongside me. I aim through my study and this thesis to bridge the gap between my chosen disciplines, to create a sufficiently integrated, coherent document, and to demonstrate that interdisciplinarity is not inferior to in-depth mono-disciplinary studies, as is often still the belief in academic- and professional environments.

I see the world, and I approach this study as a feminist. I am introducing you to my main feminist sources below, as well as to some of the feminists who have shaped my worldview over many years. I include two men in this introduction; one I would call the original psychoanalytic anti-feminist, the other a more benign teacher of mothers. Both have impacted my views on women and mothers significantly.

3. FEMINISM, INTERDISCIPLINARILY

Four years ago, when I had a blank computer screen in front of me and a vague idea of what I would like to study, I started with Jennifer Hockenberry Dragseth's *Thinking Woman: A Philosophical Approach to the Quandary of Gender* (2015). I read about Sappho, Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, Mary Wollstonecraft, and other early feminists. I also learned through Dragseth of the four major theories in contemporary Western feminist discourse: *gender essentialism*, *gender neutrality*, *gender existentialism*, and *gender fluidity*. I learned that gender existentialism – 'the theory that gender is a cultural construct that radically affects the way a human person acts, thinks, and sees ... herself' is roughly the theory through which I mostly make sense of the world (ibid.: 77). This view of gender is held in *second wave feminism*. I would not fit all the major sources I consult throughout my study into this camp – and neither would they – but I believe that gender existentialism is mostly the lens through which I approach it.

As mentioned above, my study plays in the liminality between psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and philosophy. I sometimes state in the text the specific discipline from which a theorist stems, but I only do that in cases where the discipline is relevant to my argument. As a rule, I don't. The reason is that although I mostly work

in social sciences in this study, I still find it important to steer away from disciplinary bias regularly encountered in interdisciplinary academic environments (Collett, 2022). What follows is an introduction to the main sources that I use in my study, with some mention of their disciplines where relevant, but mainly focusing on their contribution to the theory and narratives around motherhood as patriarchal institution, mother-title as identity, and mothering as labour (see Chapter 4 for discussions on these categories), as well as on the other themes addressed in my study.

Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939)

Well, I needed someone to be angry with, so I followed a host of feminists in directing my anger towards the father of psychoanalysis. Yet, I found Freud's personality theory a useful framework in discussing mothers' intrapsychic judgement and punishment, his general idea of female hysteria in understanding overburdened mothers' responses to the mental load, women's role in society, and female sexuality as a lack of maleness (penis envy and the Oedipus Complex in particular). I will not call him by his first name (as I do with the women below), as he is not part of my woman-circle, nor am I part of his paternity.

Donald Winnicott (1896 – 1971)

I think gently of Winnicott's good enough mother concept in an otherwise rather harsh male classical psychoanalysis. After introducing this concept to the other RPs, it instantly became shorthand between us for the idea that mothers' fallibilities should be seen against their humanness, and in the context of an impossible load. I also found his book *The Child, The Family, and The Outside World* (1964) useful in my discussion on the different roles of mothers in society. I do not call him by his first name either. He is kind, but still no woman and not a mother.

Simone de Beauvoir (1918 – 1986)

I have been aware of Simone's dictum 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' since a young age (1953/1949: 295). As I grew up, she has been the epitome of feminism for me. In later years, and more so through my study, I have been seeing her less as an unblemished icon and more as a human (childless, husbandless) woman writing from within a very specific cultural, socio-economic, and political climate. As will be clear from this text, I still draw from her philosophy, but through my own contextual lens. I have found her contribution to definitions helpful in my own attempts, as well as her criticism of classical psychoanalysis, her thoughts on mythmaking, ideas on reproduction and the ambivalence of the mother/other choice, the different roles of women, and personal freedom.

Betty Friedan (1921 – 2006)

I have great admiration for Betty who, despite her *summa cum laude* degree, chose to write her feminist manifestoes and pledges in household magazines rather than in academic journals. In this way she reached enough American housewives to spark the second wave of American feminism. I appreciate her unapologetic writing style, and her *feminine mystique* idea helped me to think through our (RPs') frustrations with the socially prescribed supposed mother-image.

Adrienne Rich (1929 – 2012)

Adrienne is one of those people that I wish I had known personally. She sounds like *us*; she speaks an embodied, honest language that I understand and identify with. She does not spare herself from self-interrogation – I guess I see her as the patient I would have loved to see in my practice room as well as the mother I could discuss anything with. I tap into her work extensively in trying to understand motherhood as patriarchal institution, and how it translates into our (RPs) everyday lives.

Hélène Cixous (1937 –)

As mentioned earlier, one of the first essays I read at the beginning of my study was Hélène's *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976). I adhered to her command for women to write themselves into existence that caused me to slowly experience me growing into a self that I was only vaguely aware of before. Her *écriture féminine*, or female writing, motivated me to write in an unapologetically embodied way that I, unapologetically, believe belongs to women.

Joan Raphael-Leff (1941 –)

Joan is a respected psychoanalyst as well as a harsh critic of classical psychoanalysis. I am grateful for her contributions on maternal subjectivity and her normalisation of maternal ambivalence. I used her four basic mother orientations (*facilitator, regulator, reciprocator, and conflicted*) in arguing the *Madonna-Whore* myth, and in discussing different maternal roles.

Jacqueline Rose (1945 –)

Jacqueline, a giant public intellectual and academic, writes in the liminality between psychoanalysis, feminism, politics, and literature. I used her ideas on maternal ambivalence, subjectivity, and specifically a mother's love *and* hate for her child in better understanding maternal ambivalence. I appreciate her urgency around the importance for mothers to get to know themselves – a nudge towards psychotherapy/psychoanalysis.

Gayle Letherby (1959 –)

Gayle is the supervisor that any PhD fellow should have on order (and many more songs of praise to follow in this document). Apart from that role, she is an experienced sociologist and prolific academic writer. I am using her work on the social position as well as internal experiences of voluntary and involuntary childless women. She has

introduced me to auto/biography, I am using I-poetry throughout my study because of her, I am constantly reflecting on my own 'doctoral journey as an emotional, embodied, political experience' because of her approach and her book with the same title (co-edited with Twinley, 2022). My study and I would have been all the poorer without her multiple contributions.

Jane Lazarre (1943 –)

I have drawn extensively on Jane as a writer, mother, and feminist. I see *The Mother Knott* (1975) as a fine narrative example of a mother's experience. Even though it is time- and context written, her almost 50-year-old early motherhood story of extreme ambivalence, desperation, exhaustion, attempts to reclaim a lost self, as well as elation could have been written today. Her book is a daunting indication of how policies may have changed somewhat, but that the patriarchal institution of motherhood has not changed enough, and that too many individual mother-stories therefore still sound quite the same.

Many Others

Although not used much in this document, I was informed, within the years of my study and before, by many contemporary thinkers, some of them feminists, others not necessarily. The most prominent of them are: Annie Ernaux (her autobiographical work and memory, *and l'écriture plate*), Svetlana Alexievich (her polyphonic writings), Siri Hustvedt (her interdisciplinary feminist essays), Jeanette Winterson (her embodied female writing and autofiction), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (her fierce, unapologetic African feminism), Rollo May (his existentialist psychology, and especially his book *The Courage to Create*, 1975, that motivated me to get going), Colm Tóibín (in particular *The Testament of Mary*, 2012, in which he links mythology to lived experience), Clarissa Pinkola Estés (who introduced me to mythmaking and womanhood long before I became a mother), Gregory Bateson (who opened my eyes to ecosystems decades ago, and who still mesmerises me), Byung-Chul Han (who saved me from burnout with his volume *The Burnout Society*, 2015, and which I found

useful in thinking through mothers' impossible mental load), Anne Fadiman (I love her familiar essay genre with which she brings her own voice and her own story into public writing). I am grateful to Pumla Dineo Gqola, Lou-Marié Kruger, Mamphela Ramphele, Angela Davis, and Angela Garbes whose writings have confronted me with my Whiteness, the lack of intersectionality in my story, and the realisation that an intersectional, African study would not have been mine.

All the sources above, and their impact on me, is another example of how a mind is formed throughout a lifetime of learning, reading, living life, and reflecting on it.

4. CONCLUSION

I started this chapter with a history and background of the city of Reggio Emilia, and I sketched the fundamental principles of the Reggio philosophy. I continued with subsections on the principles of social constructionism, the narrative voice and own stories, auto/biography, the politics of epistemology, ecosystemic- and complexity theories, and interdisciplinarity. I explained how and why I used each principle in my study. I ended the chapter with a short introduction to the main feminist and other theoretical sources that I use throughout my study, and mentioned also those that have been impacting me for many years.

I mentioned earlier in this chapter that our identities are shaped by our socially constructed positions (Misawa, 2010). I have also mentioned that, in Hanish's words, the personal is political (Parsons & Chappell, 2020), and that epistemology, methodology, reflectivity, positionality, and power are often addressed in auto/biographical work (ibid.). I tell my story and describe my positionality in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: POSITIONALITY

1. INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2 I told a story about the city of Reggio Emilia and how the Reggio philosophy was born from its history. I discussed its fundamental principles and how I use them in my study. I continued with short introductions to the main feminist and other theoretical sources that inform my study as well as some others that have been impacting me for many years.

I dedicate this chapter to my story because the personal is political (e.g. Parsons & Chappell, 2020), and to making my positionality as researcher explicit, because our socially constructed positions mould our identities and shape the knowledge we produce (Misawa, 2010).

2. THE STORY OF ME, MY CLAN, AND SOME

‘The stories we tell are only a version of the truth, maybe not even the whole truth’ (Pelias, 2008: 1311).

The story of me is 51 years long. Short? Not all of it will find you as reader. Not all of it will ever again find me as recaller. What will find the screen through my fingers through telling through memory is today’s version of a part-story that made me the mother I am now. Which is to ever-change from the moment I get up from my chair to check on my children’s screen time, bath time, and their appetites as dinner creeps closer.

I was born under Taurus in the May of 1973, during the high tide of Apartheid South Africa. I grew up in Mpumalanga province, Place of the Rising Sun, in a house in a forest, with bees nesting in the wood shavings between the double wooden walls. One of the greatest gifts from my father was his love for children and the earth, for it is this combination that brought us there. It was a place of comfort, teaching me an acute awareness of nature; bright stars, fresh stream water, bramble bushes, red clay mud,

the ever-present call of the cicadas during summer months, and my love affair with the honeybees.

To belong

To be belonged to

I walk through woods

*Backbones, branches, bones,
holding tight all flesh and blood.
Pine needles or my hair?*

The wind:

mechanical assistance to the movement of my form.

Pure mountain water river in my veins:

*Enough space for the otter and the trout,
Enough food for the otter and the trout,
For bees to drink and birds to bathe.*

The ever-present humming of the bees and the cicada:

*Are they throbbing reminders of aliveness
or is it my heart's pulsation in my throat?*

I wonder where they start,

they end,

I start,

I end,

and who is who.

Who belong to whom?

(Van der Walt, 2020).

That Mpumalanga Forest was also a place of solitude and loneliness. I am the second born of four children, and the only sister. I remember how I was frequently offended by others' assumption that I should be terribly spoiled because I am the only girl. My version was experiences of exclusion because of my gender – living in a patriarchal society and a forest where girls are protected by boys or left at home. I often felt alone and misunderstood during my formative years in the forest, and I think this experience partly contributed to a pervasive sense that I have carried throughout my life, of not really belonging to a specific clan.

We moved to the city when I was 13, and I attended an art school for my secondary schooling. There I was part of a community that placed itself on the fringe of mainstream society, and often challenged implicit, nonsensical rules. Our school principal was an artist himself. He understood.

Although not entirely my family story, I was born into, and grew up in oppressive, patriarchal, Afrikaans, white, middle-class, Christian, minority rule society. In South Africa, this is the historical position of the perpetrator. A position that is taking me a lifetime to integrate into my more desired story of social awareness, sensitivity, and respect in a developing country with a current unemployment rate of 33,5%, rampant gender-based violence, sky-rocketing teenage pregnancy numbers, wanting public education-, healthcare, and other social support systems, a culture of corruption from government level to grass-roots, and economically devastating infrastructure and service delivery crises (Stats SA, September 2024). I do not come from a far-left progressive family with an anti-Apartheid struggle history. A background that I would have changed if it were possible, and a story that I will work with for the rest of my time in this beloved, scorched heartland. But 'becoming everything you were not, only tightens the noose – *writing against* is another form of bad faith and you can't change the past by opposing it. We can only learn to live *with it*' (Clarke, 2018, para. 27. Italics in the original).

I am privileged and I am free.

I have an education

I have always had a chair and a desk and a teacher in a classroom

I have access to the education I choose

I am free.

I have always had the right to vote

I have never been subject to overt violence because of my skin colour

I do not know what it is like to queue in the rain at a hospital's back door, hoping to see a doctor in the next few days, just because of my race

I am free.

I do not know an empty pantry, or boxed milk because the kitchen has no refrigerator

I do not have a single family member who is not able to find, or make, work

I have always had financial back-up, even if not always from my own purse

I have a passport full of stamps

I am free.

I am free to choose a religion or philosophy

I am free to wear whatever clothes I prefer

I have never been forced by dogma to cover parts of my body that I choose not to

I am free.

I have ever only been subject to subtle gender-based violence

I have never been inhibited from expressing my gender identity, however alternative it may be

I am unmarried to the old regime

I am free.

I am free to choose the partner/s I wish to be with, no inhibition due to sexual orientation

gender

social stance

money

level of education

language

race

I do not speak from, or ever assume, an intersectional position or understand anything of the lived experience of Black women or queer people. I speak from White, heterosexual privilege.

I am privileged and I am free.

I spent my first year after school as an *au pair* in Europe, helping to form the minds and emotional worlds of two already troubled boys from the limited wisdom of an 18-year-old, depressed, misplaced young woman from Africa. I often knew then that both the boys and I were in trouble, and my feeling during that year was that I should not have my own. It took me 21 years to change my mind, and I feel different now. I know my children are lucky to have me. I fail them often and dramatically; I recently left their father, I suffer from dysthymia more often than not, I forget not to curse in front of them, I do not get it right all the time. The thing is, I know it often enough. I keep them in my mind as separate individuals, I try not to teach them my preferences and beliefs as truth, I cook them good food, we build beautiful puzzles, kick balls in the park, light candles, do gratitude rituals, listen to a wide range of musical genres, we read read together, I show them our beautiful country and the full moon.

The other day my son, who is turning six today, as I write this, ventured up the grungy, dirty, dark, pigeon-infested emergency exit staircase in the underbelly of our

apartment block. He was not sure whether to take on this journey, ruled by terrifying monsters and with a vastly uncertain destination. My words to him were that he should always do things that scare him just a little bit, for when he survives them, those experiences will make him brave. He was charmed and convinced that he should proceed, and with delight and pride in himself as reward. I knew again that part of my mothering role is to kick him out of this nest – bit by bit, age-appropriately – in a way that he believes he is leaving of his own accord. Because he is brave and smart to go off on his own, making wise decisions because he was taught to by the people who mattered most, and who survived the loss of their baby to the wide world.

I am sitting with my fingers on the keyboard, contemplating my son's story while his godfather is taking him on an outing for his birthday. What is wrong with this picture? There should be something very wrong measured against the harshness of my psychoanalytically informed super-ego voice today. I should be spending all of today's waking hours with him whose day it is, as a good mother should. I did not mention that he was woken by his older sister and this not-perfect mother early this morning with a song and a dance, home-made card, home-made hot chocolate, and a tray full of home-wrapped gifts. I also omitted the arrangement with his father and friends and that same sister and this same mother later today for another song and another dance and some more gifts. And the outing with his godfather. And the class party with the real birthday cake planned for next weekend. I did not mention all of the above because for a moment I forgot the fact that I am, in Winnicott's words, a good enough mother (1953). Because I am not available on tap, I must surely be failing my children. At least that is what *they* say. They? Yup. The construction of what I believe I should be as a mother, comes from the elusive *them*. And me, granted, especially if I boast of never giving up critical thinking and reality checks. But I get the idea from somewhere.

I am fortunate to still have both my parents alive. My siblings and I were blessed with an example of *a good marriage*, where my parents love and respect each other; something I have been striving towards for close to three decades, until the recent demise of my own. For the most part, my parents have been playing the traditional

father and mother roles. My father coaching rugby while my mother gave birth to my older brother and two years later, the same with me. My father, the primary breadwinner, working long hours for the grub; my mother, the primary caregiver, working part-time as a nicety, and because my father allowed her to work, and also because she wanted to. This is an ongoing banter between us. She says, with my youngest brother's cheering on, that she never bought into patriarchy, I say she knew how to make it work for her. My father makes the barbecue fire, offers beer to the men and wine to their wives, mother doing potato salad and checking the dough's rise while keeping company with her girlfriends and big-enough-to-help-girlchildren in the kitchen. Dad says grace and sits at the head of the table, mom tidies the house before dad walks in after a long day, because he likes it that way. But, as my mother often reminds me, there were subtle exceptions to this patriarchal arrangement which, I believe, have ultimately permitted me to partially liberate myself from the weight of this system. My mother left us with friends a few times as young children so she could attend holiday schools in the city (something that was simply not done by most mothers in that time and context); she served on the church council for many years (a role traditionally reserved for men only); my father took the supporting act in my mother's later career as organiser of an annual national choral competition. There are more.

My high school sweetheart and I got married when we were 23 years old. We met at the school gate when we were 13, me fresh from pre-adolescent forest-life let loose in the concrete jungle of South Africa's capital. Our challenges have mostly been those of middle-class suburbans, and nothing that we did not eventually manage to make sense of, until I did not anymore. I married him because we delighted in life together. We created adventures and beauty together, and there is much more to our rich story and my gratitude for having been part of it than what is possible to express here. In retrospect, I also married him to survive life, to not be alone. For all the gratitude towards my parents, I also feel that they did not throw me out of the nest, did not prepare me for the world on my own, did not make me believe that I can do this without the protection of a man, and a man from within the Christian (*etcetera*) idiom – the idiom that I knew. I still recall the visceral mortification when I got onto the aeroplane

on my own to fly to Europe after my final school exams. I returned home, to my old bedroom, after the year in Europe and chose to study down the road. I remember a similar fear, four years later, when I left for another year abroad. My sweetheart saved me from separation and individuation by following soon after my departure. I was delighted and relieved to marry out of my parental home into my husband's. I was settled, safe from the outside world, would be taken care of by a man, as it should be.

From a young age I had a future pastoral image of myself in dungarees in a farm kitchen, with half a dozen kids around. Kneading bread, harvesting strawberries, making cheese, preserving for later use whatever my large family would not consume fresh from the garden. At 39, I worked at an old hospital on the outskirts of town where we were able to live that pastoral story on farmland. I had the first of the children of my future fantasy, the crops, cow fat soap boiling on an outside fire, the yoghurt, sauerkraut, cheese in the pantry, fresh eggs from the coup, the lot.

Shortly after my daughter's birth I fell gravely ill. The sort of illness that exists in one's head, that permeates into one's body and makes one cling to one's child, like one would to a limb at risk of falling off. The impossibility of letting her go from my breast became an all-consuming obsession that no father, no mentally well human being, could fathom. I was clinically depressed. I jumped into the mother-fantasy, an over-identification with a role that was supposed to be only a part of me. I had no reality bridge between my most recent role then, of free, older student self and this earth mother (who also happened to work full-time as only psychologist at a lock-up tuberculosis facility where more of my patients died than not). I lived through the disillusionment that my pastoral dream was not much more than a yearning for simplicity and peace, a desire to return to the earth and to feel safe. I decided to fall pregnant for the first time at age 38, not because of a deep desire for my own baby, or a knowledge that it was my body's biological time, but after a visit to the gynaecologist. I decided to fall pregnant 16 years into married life because of my age and the compounding statistics against a healthy pregnancy and a normal child. A mere three months later she was growing in my body. Now, after some years in clinical practice with mothers, and especially through this study, I realise that the ability to

decide to fall pregnant after mocking fate for so many years, and then being pregnant after three months was an enormous privilege. How could I ever have thought that it just happens as planned?

I never spent much time thinking about what kind of a mother I thought I would be, what kind of a mother I wanted to be apart from that pastoral fantasy. I suppose I implicitly assumed that I have enough familial- and societal examples to just follow suit. Over the years in my private psychology practice, I have done a lot of parenting work. Sometimes formal sessions, if that was a parent's wish. Those I have always found difficult, as parents ask for reading lists and theories to ascribe to, authors to quote, applications for kids to be coded into. But the advice I have had for them has always been along a different route:

*On the first day
after the birth of my first child
I lay in hospital
with this foreign, new Life on my chest*

*Surrounded by books
on parenting
breastfeeding
bathing
caring.*

And I was scared.

*Fear
Laced with excitement
Love
Gratitude*

One thing I did know:

*That I was new
Never to return.*

*A good doctor with a heavy accent walked in and asked what I thought I was doing in
this library.*

Throw these books away,
she said,
A mother has to feel it in her bones.

I listened,
and for a moment I was free.

Then I knew
she was a parent too.

(Van der Walt, 2020).

Parenting work can, and probably should, comprise a dollop of others' minds. But with a dollop of others' minds I mean mostly conversations, reading, digesting, integrating, living. In reading and conversing with others, I check my own realities, and I remind myself never to stop thinking critically. In digesting and integrating others' theories and opinions, I check their realities, and again I remind myself never to stop thinking critically. The becoming-a-mother task is not about learning others' techniques or approaches, it is about finding what it means for me to be the mother of my children, how they experience me living this role in relation to them, what impact I have on their developing stories. Therefore, rather than attending parenting sessions, I prefer to talk about life and meaning and procreation and planet illness and identity and social roles and gender roles; conversations leading to- and from parenting – of myself by my parents, of my children by their parents, of siblings', cousins', friends', others' children by them all. Conversations where this web's sources are forgotten, in time growing enormous branches into the ends of conversation. Where technique and approach are

so integrated that it has become part of my maternal identity, and then forgotten until the next conversation. This is an application of Reggio's hundred languages (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006), of ecosystemic theory (Bateson, 1972), of complexity theory (Theise, 2023). Like the training of the samurai, which is a training for spontaneity, as only when the technique was forgotten and the sword had become a continuation of his arm, would the samurai survive. He only became a samurai because he had forgotten the technique of the sword (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). *A mother has to feel it in her bones*. I referred to the samurai analogy in my Masters dissertation in the context of becoming a psychotherapist (Van der Walt, 2009), as mastering technique *and* practicing an art, and that time and experience in the psychotherapy domain as well as in life are needed for the development of mastery and artistic abilities. So, it also is with mothering. I wish to learn from others, from my own mother, from myself in mothering my own children, from them in their feedback to me mothering them, and every now and then I find it useful to remember the beliefs I keep and the techniques I have forgotten.

Partly due to my major depressive episode after the birth of my daughter, I overdid so-called *attachment parenting*. I am grateful that I was one of those mothers (or maybe patients) who clung to her child rather than the opposite. We made a family bed on the floor and camped there for years. I breastfed in the bookshop, restaurant, at the dinner table, on the train, and everywhere in between. I was a lioness with a small cub. It looked beautiful from the outside; such a happy baby, dedicated mother, united family. But on the inside I lost sight of my other parts. My maternal role engulfed me, and I forgot about the rest of me. I weaned my son in the June before his third birthday. At that time my discontent for his demands on my body was growing, as it should have, in aid of the necessary weaning ahead, and the breast-on-tap started feeling counter-productive. Before I had children, a very young, male, dietetics intern once told me that the first year of breastfeeding was for immunity, brain, gut, and other known physiological developmental gains, the second year for attachment between mother and child, and thereafter because of the mother's inability to let her child go – not a nice-to-have for the child anymore, but a burden. I had no idea what he was talking about at the time, and thought it out of turn coming from him, a non-mother. But his

words stuck, and now suddenly rang true. Oh, and the dramatic freedom of the first night back in my own bed, with my own books and candles and stones on my own bedside table under my own reading lamp. Where was I all this time?, I kept wondering. I have no idea for how long I stared at my things. *For a moment I was free.* Until maternal ambivalence made my acquaintance. I became well familiar with the ever-present push-pull-push-pull waves of full immersion of myself as a mother against myself as therapist, student, partner, lover, friend, sister, daughter. Some roles fully willing to partner with mother, others actively excluding her.

I went back to a full-time psychotherapy practice soon after weaning my son. Without explicit arrangement, my husband and I started swapping roles. Over time he became our children's primary caregiver, and I became the primary breadwinner. My guilt for not being on tap for my children any longer as well as a resentment towards him for not playing the traditionally male/father role gradually grew stronger, as did my ambivalence. And my ambivalence around him being the best father that I have come across, an asset that I could not see as a replacement for his opting out of the traditional role. I was not able to lay down, or even share, the mental load. Maybe it was a mistake that we allowed this part-reversal of roles to develop gradually, never made explicit and formally negotiated. The construct of what I thought we had to be, the expectation, stemmed from the story of my parents' generation; the social construct that I was raised to embrace, to accept, ultimately to believe in. Just that I never did – the embracing-accepting-believing part. The practice I did for a bit, until an active exit from it.

My maternal ambivalence partly lies in the body connection-invasion; at the same time a positive and negative one: a connection *and* invasion at once. I believe my children gained much personality development potential and wellbeing in the close attachment and bodily connection between us during their earliest years. I am deeply grateful for this gift from me to them. Simultaneously, I also lost parts of myself in the bodily attachment to my breastfeeding children, with significant healing taking place in their long-overdue weaning; healing from the loss of self after the birth of my first child, followed by my depressive episode.

At the end of June 2021, after three quarters of a lifetime together, I needed to exit the marriage. An end and a beginning. A sadness and a freedom impossible to part. Maternal ambivalence at its extreme. Have I really the ability to split my children off for a week at a time every second week when they are with their father? I was cocooning into this new urban grotto, my children with me only half of their time, and where I sometimes have no desire to actively mother them when they are not with me. This last acknowledgement is one of the biggest taboos in my world, and I feel my heart racing as I am typing it. For long self-chastising moments I forget about the thing called *healthy* maternal ambivalence and that it was psychoanalysis that ‘ruled out shared-care’ (Raphael-Leff, 2010b: 1), that suggests total merging between primary caregiver – breastfeeding mother, that is – and child for the first chapter of the child’s life. I also forget that my children are long past the first chapter of their lives, and that they need me in a different way now to when they were infants. My super-ego loves this guilt-inducing joy ride within which I am made to believe (by said super-ego, and much of society following suit) that my choice to have time, a life, outside of my children is detrimental to them, and that I should measure my self-worth in terms of my ‘desire to mother’ (Letherby, 1994: 256).

I became so intimately acquainted with maternal ambivalence and the blurred definitions of our maternal and paternal roles towards the end of our marriage, that I decided to spend significant time and effort on this formal study. As Letherby says, ‘personal experience, then, is sometimes the motivation for research’ (2015: 133). So, this study stems from my life story; a slow unfolding of a deeply ambivalent mother who has never felt she had permission to speak freely about this conundrum (for a conundrum it surely is from a social- and super-ego point of view), but with a nagging suspicion that she is not alone. I would be negating this origin if I did not pay sufficient attention to my own story. I am therefore commencing my study with this story as a written document in an *auto*/biographical way (see Chapter 2 for definitions of *auto*/biography, and *auto*/biography).

I have a honey-coloured desk, an angel above my head, northern sun, pigeons and date palms with ivy outside the window. I have stones and feathers. I have

bookshelves, a computer, real notebooks, a seasoned supervisor, and a first reader who marvels in my academic endeavours and thoughts, wanting me to become fully alive again through my reading and writing of this study. I also have excitement; that aliveness of standing-on-the-edge-and-whistling-into-valleys feeling. And then the valleys echo back, confirming this is no illusion no dream no mere desire. And I ask: Now what? Now do what you are doing right-write now, replies the Oracle. Write. The text, the academic endeavour, the enquiry is born here.

3. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I told my life story because I have a disclaimed political, feminist agenda with my study. My story and my positionality continuously shape my identity and the knowledge I produce. This disclaimer is part of auto/biography's ethical practice.

In Chapter 4 I extrapolate on the ethical considerations that underlie my study. I introduce the eight other RPs (excluding me) through character sketches. I further pose what you can expect from this auto/biographical thesis through a discussion on the research design: the social constructionist process of enquiry and how it guided the content, and how I used the different data sets in thematic content analysis, autobiography, character sketches, free-form poetry, and I-poetry. I also consider the possible effects of the text on the reader.

CHAPTER 4: THE METHOD IN THE MADNESS

1. INTRODUCTION

I mentioned Hanish's dictum 'the personal is political' (Parsons & Chappell, 2020) at the beginning of Chapter 3. Because I have a political, feminist agenda with my study, I found it important to include my background story and to disclaim my positionality as researcher. I agree with Misawa (2010) that my socially constructed position has a great impact on how my identity is shaped, and what kind of knowledge I produce through my study.

I spoke in Chapter 2 about auto/biography as research method, described as a process as well as a product, 'a method and a text', 'both an epistemological orientation and a methodological approach' (Parsons & Chappell, 2020: 289). I also mentioned that epistemology, methodology, reflectivity, positionality, and power are often addressed in auto/biographical work (ibid., 2020). Against this background, I start Chapter 4 with an argument on the ethical implications of auto/biography as research approach and as knowledge creation. I continue with an introduction to each RP (barring me) through a character sketch. Next I explain the research design under the process of enquiry, how this social constructionist process guided the content, and the different ways in which I use the data (thematic content analysis, autobiography, character sketches, polyphonic composite characters' stories, free-form poetry, and I-poetry). I conclude this chapter with possible effects of the text on the reader.

2. ETHICS

One of auto/biography's major considerations is the ethical practice of knowledge creation. How, for what purpose, and with what political agenda do researchers create specific sets of knowledge? This consideration ties in closely with the politics of epistemology, one of the fundamental principles of the Reggio philosophy (see Chapter 2 for a full discussion). As detailed in Chapter 2, from the REA, knowledge creation is seen as taking place in social contexts, and through processes of meaning-creation in ongoing contact between people and the world (Mineo, 2021; Rinaldi,

2015). Maguire (2004) states the importance for researchers (and policy makers) to engage in self-reflectivity about their own discourses and research practices, and the ethics in human research in general. She reflects on the significance of 're-searching', and a need for 'understanding' participants' participation, respecting their roles, and 'recognizing their voices in research activities', as well as the inherent power relations between researcher and participant (ibid.: 2). Maguire states the value of 'ethics as a dialogic, evolving, and iterative process' (ibid.: 3). She further explains the ethical significance of listening to the voices of RPs, and a commitment to understanding 'their perspectives and social worlds as they do' (ibid.: 3).

In my study, mothers' stories of personal experience and reflection serve as primary research material, and these RPs could easily have been left feeling exposed and vulnerable should the ethics around my position as researcher not be considered in depth. As there were no institutional ethics guidelines or limitations to this study, the specific ethics regarding my study remained a standard supervision agenda point throughout, and in which we took guidance from the BSA Statement of Ethical Practice (2017). I also turned to general qualitative research as well as auto/biography and autoethnography sources (Bless et al., 2013; Ellis, 2007; Frosh, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I think about ethics in this study from three different dimensions proposed by Caroline Ellis, namely procedural ethics, situational ethics or ethics in practice, and relational ethics (2007). I further consider possible ethical implications of using autobiographical material through a discussion on censorship.

2.1 Procedural Ethics

Throughout the data collection and writing phases of my study I am, as far as I can be, aware of, and abiding by, the universal research principles of non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy, justice, and fidelity. The ethics guidelines that I try to abide by at all times are informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality (Bless et al., 2013; Ellis, 2007). The anonymity, or not, of the RPs was a group discussion. Although I am calling the RPs by their self-chosen pseudonyms, I also wrote character sketches of all the participants. The writing of these sketches was an iterative co-construction, with all participants reading and editing, and signing off their own

sketches. They all willingly accepted the possibility of being recognised, and therefore participated in the creation of sketches that they approved for publication.

I am working towards credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as qualities of good qualitative research in this study (Bless et al., 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These principles and guidelines fall within the first of the three dimensions, namely procedural ethics (Ellis, 2007: 4).

2.2 Ethics in Practice

A second dimension is situational ethics, or 'ethics in practice' (Ellis, 2007: 4). This dimension addresses ethical practice implied rather than overtly prescribed and occurs during unplanned moments. Hayes refers to 'less anticipated/more unanticipated ethical issues' that may arise during the research (in Parsons & Chappell, 2020: 288). What should my role be (as trained clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, but in this case researcher, *non*-therapist, and full RP) if someone disclosed something that compromised my professional ethics code if I did not intervene or disclose? What if someone asked for help beyond the research arrangement? An example of ethical practice from my study included the opportunity for discontinuance at any stage of the study (Bless et al., 2013; Ellis, 2007). My ethics work done throughout the data collection writing project and research participant group meetings (RPMs) was also to track RPs' stories and reactions to others' stories, to create a holding space, and to refer anyone to psychotherapy or other appropriate support when indicated or directly requested. Whether they followed up with therapeutic support outside this relationship would, of course, be up to the RPs themselves. I was, throughout the process, very sensitive about this issue (whether a particular individual took up therapy if I thought they needed it). My therapy training made it difficult for me to accept that people may sometimes respond to another's stories with due distress, and that – even though it was indirectly my doing in inviting them into the space – they still had the agency to seek help or not.

I referred one participant to psychotherapy during the process because she asked for support due to triggers back to previous trauma, partly as a result of the writing and

conversation process and content. I had no case of discontinuance; we started and ended as a group of nine participants.

2.3 Relational Ethics

The ethics considerations for this study go beyond procedural ethics and ethics in practice. The conundrums around auto/biographical research stories that include the researcher's 'intimate others' is an added third dimension (Ellis, 2007: 1). The researcher's ethics work lies in taking responsibility for how and why we write about identifiable others as part of our life stories as research content and includes the acknowledgement and witnessing of the others' stories (Frosh, 2011). Frosh draws on philosophers Levinas and Buber's traditions of thought focused on 'the project of living an ethical life' (ibid.: 225). Clarke (2018) believes that in writing about our close ones, those who are still alive, we can perhaps say things that feel impossible to say to them directly. Growing up it felt impossible to Clarke to tell his father that he loved him, so he wrote about it (ibid.). It may be so that it is under certain circumstances, and in certain relationships, easier to express gratitude, love, admiration, positive feedback in writing – and even more so as part of a formal research study. I believe that the opposite is also the case in my story; that criticism, negative feedback, acknowledgement of the roles of my 'intimate others' in my story of judgement (of self and others) are possibly more difficult for me to express in writing as part of this study than in personal conversation with them (Ellis, 2007: 1).

Ethical questions on how to write about intimate others do not only relate to our direct relationships with them. It spans wider to include readers of intimate material of others. Ellis (2007) recalls a student saying that he did not feel comfortable reading material she wrote about her mother when her mother did not know about what she wrote. If he (the student) should ever meet her (the mother), he would know things about her that she is not aware of.

As mentioned before, my story includes growing up in a patriarchal society and living through a failed marriage. I do not blame my parents for not saving me from patriarchy, and I do not blame my ex-husband for the failure of our marriage. Yet, I live with

discomfort in a system-story within which they are major role players. How do I write about my parents, my ex-husband, my children, my siblings, my partner, who are all alive and who are all important characters in the stories I tell about myself as a mother? (Ellis, 2007). Ellis follows Slattery and Rapp, after Buber, in describing relational ethics as a way of going about that reflects your character, and at the same time also takes responsibility for your actions and the consequences that they may have on others (ibid.). She further states that relational ethics considers mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between the researcher and those researched, and between the researcher and their communities (ibid.). My auto/biographical study would be lacking if I did not include the difficult parts; it would not reflect my character, and it would negate the connectedness between me and the intimate others in my story. Even though not always rose-coloured, I believe that the acknowledgement of my significant relationships pays respect to them, and hopefully in the most dignified way possible.

How do I write about the other RPs who upstage me and whom I upstage and with whom I vehemently disagree and agree at times in telling each other our mothering stories? The relationships I had with them before commencing the study, as well as the relationships developed with some during the study, have a direct impact on how, and what I write about them (Twinley & Letherby, 2022). I knew beforehand that there would be relational implications to including friends and colleagues in my research, for example that important relationships censor me in what/how I can write. How do I write about my feelings regarding gossip in the RPMs without stepping on the culprits' toes? How do I write about the intellectualising-as-defence-against-emotional-vulnerability of a group member whose inputs were revered by a more emotionally available and -vulnerable group member who judged herself as inferior? How do I describe my internal resistance against a group member who had such a great need for attention that I sometimes simply did not feel like hearing her stories? How much do I challenge a group member who asked me to censor her I-poetry in order not to display any of her maternal shortcomings? How do I write about resisting the boundary violations of a participant in need of therapeutic support? How do I tell the story of a participant whose mother I know intimately well if I am not sure that this mother knows her daughter's stories?

Clarke (2018) argues that if his father were still alive, it would have been an unethical intrusion to write about his own experience of his father's death, if it were to be for his (Clarke's) personal purposes. He then substantiates his writing by adding that – but – it would be worth the privacy violation if the narrative 'serves the purpose for others and me – to become the best we can outside of my son-father relationship' as it then will have served his 'narrative purposes' (Clarke, 2018, para. 19). He is clearly in a double bind. Two options: do not use sensitive material of intimate others who are alive and with whom we need/want to live, and with this censorship lose out (yourself and your readers) on a possible opportunity 'to become the best we can outside of' the relationship with said intimate ones, or share the stories, gain academically and even therapeutically (for yourself and your readers), and run the risk of damaging intimate relationships. I am not convinced by Clarke. I am not sure.

Are there other options of minimising relational damage? This dilemma refers to the relational ethics that I have faced since deciding to do an auto/biographical study that concerns my intimate others as well as RPs that I have relationships with outside this study. I wrote numerous stories, initially for the purpose of this study, that I later omitted upon realisation that they are self-therapy attempts rather than valuable additions to the study. My fantasy is still sometimes that I will gain clarity on my own story by means of highlighting my intimate ones' missteps – even more so when I can theoretically substantiate their wrongdoings. What would be closer to the truth of my character (Ellis, 2007), is to critically think through the impact of my intimate others on my story as a mother, and to acknowledge their roles from within the appropriate time, gender, racial, socio-economic, etcetera contexts. Ellis is, and in this study I am, concerned with how to honour our relational responsibilities and concurrently 'present our lives in a complex and truthful way for readers' (ibid.: 14).

2.4 Censorship in a So-Called Free Society: Writing Between the Lines

In considering more options of writing difficult stories in useful ways, I turned to twentieth century German-Jewish political philosopher, Leo Strauss. Strauss lived and wrote in an era when persecution and ultimate punishment was feared for those who opposed 'the government-sponsored views' but who would not be silenced (Strauss,

1952: 22); that small group of critical thinkers Jung calls a ‘subversive minority’ (Jung, 1982/1958: 4). Strauss believes that it is ‘a safe venture to tell the truth one knows to benevolent and trustworthy acquaintances, or more precisely, to reasonable friends’ (1952: 23). He thinks that any person of truly independent thought can express their mind, and ‘even utter their thoughts in print without incurring any danger, provided he (*sic.*) is capable of writing between the lines’ (*ibid.*).

Strauss (political philosophy) and Jung (psychoanalysis) were clearly part of the subversive minority, both writing from within oppressive states, and both fearing external persecution. Since their mid-twentieth century writings, history has moved along and at least a huge part of the developed world offer some level of free speech without the fear of external persecution. Women have been called to write (Cixous, 1976) and have obliged *en masse* (Adichie, 2014; Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1982; Estés, 1992; Gqola, 2017; Krog, 2020; Lessing, 1977; Mitchell, 1974; and many more recent examples, a list impossible to exhaust).

I cannot claim that I am subject to overt oppression and persecution from a state or church in the country and the city where I live. Concerning gender equality and anti-sexism, South Africa has one of the most progressive charters of human rights; we are theoretically free to say and do what we believe in. Even though we have ample women writers, advocates for gender equality on all levels, and men as feminists, as mentioned before, we also have a gender-based violence story of pandemic proportions (Gqola, 2015, 2017), and a patriarchal system comfortably in place (Rampele, 2008, Gqola, 2017). Black South African business leader, activist, and academic Mamphela Ramphele speaks of sexism as ‘one of our most tenacious ghosts’ (2008: 99), and that discrimination against women is found across all South African cultures. She believes that radical changes in attitude and practice need to be made ‘at the personal, family, community, institutional, and national levels’ if we want to align our social relationships with our constitution (*ibid.*).

If I claim my positionality statement (Chapter 3) to be fairly accurate, and if I claim to live in a dispensation where freedom of expression is possible, why would it still be

necessary for me to do this feminist study and, in reporting on it, to censor my writing, and to sometimes write between the lines? What follows is a semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional composite character's story I wrote to illustrate how the unspeakable can be spoken between the lines:

She is eight. Old enough to know what the grown-ups talk about when they tell this-and-that stories. Not quite old enough to hear between the lines. Old enough to notice how most older girls dress and to wish for a pair of red/yellow/blue plastic boy sandals – those ones on the City Golf motorcar advertisement – that all the girls in the seventh-grade cool gang wear. Not quite old enough to openly express that she secretly prefers the worn leather ones her mom's hippy friend lives in. Last night, after sleep time (but last night was a weekend night, so no fuss), she was lying on the white flokati carpet between the grown-ups (who were most certainly talking between the lines), listening to Jim Croce's hit, Time in a Bottle. They were not talking to her and she had her ears flapping, but felt special enough not to want to leave. Last night, her mom's friend, half in jest, said to her that she will grow up to wear long, tie-dyed skirts, and eat olives and fisheyes. Last night, for the first time, she knew she did not need the plastic sandals. She does not know yet that she will most certainly catch the really hot boys' attention once her breasts swell out and she has a certain swing in her hips, but with the leather sandals she will simply be too weird to date. No decent boy will take her seriously or trust her to become a good, supportive wife if she opposes the norm in even such simple things.

I often disagree with 'the government-sponsored view' and I often decide to express what I would like to call my 'independent thinking', and I chose 'trustworthy acquaintances', 'reasonable friends' to participate in this study – an attempt at being free to tell the truth without persecution (Strauss, 1952: 23). For me, persecution does not mean that by a government, but a persecution more internalised in the form of my harsh super-ego, as well as in experiences of social exclusion. Writing between the lines might be a subtle message or tonality woven into the text, it might be an amalgamation of fact with fiction, it might be a belief that the critical reader might be affected by the text in ways that enable them to co-create this story.

2.5 Censorship in a So-Called Free Society: Fact or Fiction?

I have never been particularly excited about any straight distinction between fiction and non-fiction, unless we understand such a distinction to be declarative and discretionary. In a sea of many definitions of fiction, the one I like the best is also the oldest, and it comes from Aristotle. Fiction is always a kind of truth (Tokarczuk, 2019).

Using semifictional stories to tell academic tales facilitates emotive reading by, and emotional connection with, the reader. The reader experiences their own emotions triggered by the emotions of the writer and their characters. Through fiction, the writer is free to arrange facts, events, and identities in ways that draw the reader into the story in ways that allow them a deeper understanding of other people, systems, and specific events (Letherby, 2020). Fictional characters further give the impression of universality. We are often more able to relate to stories from the pool of the human condition than from real people that we may know. Envy, sympathy, judgement, excitement, curiosity are emotional reactions likely to be experienced by the reader in a generalised way when, for example, reading the stories of Lady Constance Chatterley or Jane Bennett. When reading the factual stories of our friends and foes, our emotions of envy, judgement, etcetera stem from our own stories being triggered by them as actual, known people, and therefore limiting an openness to the entirety of possible emotional experience. Furthermore, the creation of fictional characters and stories from the data in this study, allows me to address the question of relational ethics (see above), and to protect the intimate, sensitive material of the other RPs and myself. In reading the stories, the reader may assume fiction or actual happenings and actual people, but does not know for certain, and is therefore able to connect emotionally with material that was rearranged by the author (also see the discussion on projective identification in Chapter 8). Fiction is not falsehood, and in auto/biographical writing fiction is not seen as the opposite of truth (Letherby, 2015). It is rather an amalgamation of, and a connection between my stories and those of others, and hopefully a meaningful generalisation for the reader (ibid.). Whether it is

truth or fiction, and who the real people are that the details belong to, then become irrelevant. What follows is another semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional composite character's story I wrote to further illustrate the point:

So, the obligation of having to meet her ex-husband lay heavily upon her. She would be paying for the coffee that she was invited to have. Nothing out of the ordinary there. Him complaining about the price of said (too cold not strong enough) coffee, an expectation. Nothing out of the ordinary. Again. But, oh, the delight on her little one's face of a surprise school day meeting with the parent that she is not with for the week. The mother's anticipation of her child's delight. And her adolescent daughter who will be sharing a little this and that; please remember to phone this one, mom, to make that arrangement, will you? Buy the Pilates ball for classes at school, if you can. My shoes are still in your car, would you mind dropping them at dad's, please? Dailies, the ones that were supposed to have been exchanged in the car between home and school and school and home, will be had. She will be rewarded for this coffee date with normal time with her children. That is, if one can see this quick interaction as normal time. Nothing normal about not seeing them on an ordinary school day afternoon, as would normally be the case for normal people.

Turning her back on her lover, getting dressed, lipstick applied to look as if the remains of this morning's first application, wiping her face (the most basic decency, but not the fuck wiping anything else), grabbing keys and so on, moving back into the make-believe world. Surviving the coffee, they all did. She refused a ride to the office. Said she needed the pulse of the walk. Really not wanting to re-enact by-gones, create possibilities for reversal in anyone's mind, set precedents for future rides in cars with the once intact foursome. The walk was good for her.

Then a ridiculous fantasy that her lover would appear. Surely not. She still smells his early morning visit on her body. He's at work now. Deadlines, etcetera. And this is not an erotic novel, you know. You know? Really.

He pulls over next to her, smiles, unlocks her side, winks her in.

And then the rain.

3. THE GROUP

3.1 Who Is the Group and Why?

South Africa as *Rainbow Nation* is a term coined by archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe South Africa after the Apartheid regime. This term is a description of a country comprising multiple cultures, languages, and races. As it will be impossible to assume national representation in this limited study, the key to choosing a handful of RPs lies in the rationale. How do I argue my choice, and what do I communicate through the choice, which political position do I choose to take through this choice? Brennan and Letherby (2017) state as a fundamental benefit of auto/biographical research the challenge it poses to traditional autobiographical and biographical writing by allowing voices to be heard of identities and groups of people who have previously been excluded or othered due to preference given to those privileged by gender, race, and class (2017: 157). Do I think the group I chose needed me and my study to give voice to them? Are they in some way voiceless without my hearing, writing, publishing them? I considered three possible RP groups:

A first possible group could have been a group of biological women-mothers, Afrikaans speaking, Christian by upbringing, married, conventional primary caregivers with biologically male-husbands who provide financially and on occasion a bit more, with an expectation of gratitude from the wife for the extra bit. Women who accept the *mental load* brought about by raising the sprout, keeping the house, filling the fridge, engaging the school, chattering with the women in the kitchen while their men tend the barbecue fire and keep the glasses filled. A rationale for choosing this group would be my historical context; the accepted norm within the society that I grew up in. From a South African historical perspective, this group would represent voices from the female side of the oppressor. This is, as mentioned by Brennan and Letherby (2017) above, the group of people that, apart from their gender, would have been favoured in

the previous dispensation. I therefore did not find it appropriate to give further voice to them alone through this study.

A second possible group might have been biological women-mothers from as wide a variety as possible for the sake of inclusion. Variables including race, religion, social stance, financial status, political convictions, education level and type of schooling, mother-tongue language, age of participant and her children, marital status, ways of conception, etcetera. My rationale for choosing this group would have been to be politically correct, nowadays a desired position for a middle-class, Afrikaans-speaking, South African woman like me. As a representative of the historical oppressor, I have a precarious voice in this post-Apartheid dispensation. An attempt at representing the diversity of this country in nine participants might have a minor chance at giving voice to the previously unheard (Brennan & Letherby, 2017), but it would not be more than a feeble attempt that would fail at its goal.

The third possibility is the group that emerged. Instead of choosing a specific group, very early on in the conceptualisation phase of this study, I started thinking about individuals that I would enjoy engaging with; in group conversation and with their written texts. The people who came to mind had a seeming commonality in their openness to enquiry and critical thinking. In talking about the shift in epistemological orientation and approach to his research since he worked auto/biographically in his doctorate, Brennan says that this fundamental shift always involved attempting to think critically and reflectively (Brennan & Letherby, 2017). I suspected the potential participants were not going to be default continuations of their parents-as-parents, and I hoped that most of them would therefore be interested in joining the group, and particularly benefit from working auto/biographically within this study.

I knew beforehand that all the potential participants had an advanced level of creative and/or academic writing skills in common. I wanted them to want to write about themselves as mothers, bluntly stated and without apology, with me and for my study. But also, for themselves, as part of their chronic meaning-seeking quests, and for the benefit of their children. Richardson speaks about the traditional way of thinking about

writing as a way of ‘telling’, but she sees it also as a way of ‘knowing’; discovering and analysing new aspects of the topic and how we relate to it (cited by Davidson & Letherby 2020: 65). I am well aware that, in deciding to include an advanced level of writing skills as a criterion for participation – as writing tasks (WTs) would be one of the primary data sets – I immediately excluded a large percentage of South African mothers’ voices. The group who is one of the most marginalised, and most unheard in South Africa, comprises poor, Black mothers with limited education. I acknowledge this as a great gap in my study. In a very humble attempt to acknowledge the silence of these women in my study, I created a few composite characters and wrote them into some of the stories. These stories were inspired by my own real-life experiences and of those of the other RPs. My intention was by no means to speak on behalf of people whose internal worlds I do not know, but rather to speak from my position, and those of the other RPs, in interactions with others outside the study.

Another commonality between the participants is feminism/post-feminism as applied philosophy. Does a study on maternal identity require post-patriarchal participants? Or was it me giving in to an urge for comfort amongst kindred spirits? I suspect more of the latter. I mentioned Letherby’s statement before, that ‘personal experience, then, is sometimes the motivation for research’ (2015: 133). What I omitted was the end bit ‘... and connections and relationships are made between researchers and respondents’ (ibid.). I have been up against a patriarchal system for as long as I remember, and at times when my own capacity is low, I temporarily lose the appetite for argument with those who follow suit for the sake of least resistance.

Again I recall Strauss, that ‘it is a safe venture to tell the truth one knows to benevolent and trustworthy acquaintances, or more precisely, to reasonable friends’ (Strauss, 1952: 23). But beyond the cuddle group of kindred spirits, I also hoped that the potential participants had a critical thinking capacity in common. Although they might be echoing parts of my voice, I wanted them to also be open and willing to think critically about and challenge the voices of other RPs. RPs needed to have the ability to bring their critical reflections on maternal ambivalence and other difficult/taboo questions. I therefore needed RPs for my study who could acknowledge their

ambivalence and other taboos, and in its exploration not run the risk of ego-disintegration (in a psychoanalytic sense). I believe that it is part of the ethical considerations in choosing appropriate participants to not include people that I believe do not have rigour and strong enough ego-capacities, not to invite someone with fragile defences, taking the risk of disintegration in discussing deeply repressed issues. I felt that critical thinking properties and intact ego-capacity were imperative and a common denominator in my list of potential participants. Of course my assumption that the potential participants were rigorous enough, and that those I excluded were not, was a subjective assumption and impossible to establish beforehand. So, who are these other mothers that participated in co-creating the text? Let me introduce them to you.

3.2 Character Sketches

Note: All names of RPs used throughout the text are the pseudonyms chosen by the RPs themselves.

Jackie

When babies hear other babies cry, they also start crying out of empathy. So, maybe we should have crying parties.

(Jackie)

Jackie is learned in the letter of the law. Instead of speaking highfalutin or Latin around the research table, she brings an honest humanness in her reflections on mothering. Outside this study, we sometimes sit together in coffee shops on school mornings, as if we were bunking work, each bent over her own small screen. We can do that for hours, with a sudden interruption now-and-then into the other's mind space. Out of the blue. Every time a sort of where-the-hell-did-that-random-thought-come-from-as-I-am-minding-my-own-business? And, in doing this often enough, we get to know a small part of each other's work worlds and minds.

Jackie also knows the laws of mothering, mostly set up by non-mothers, the impossible ones to get right, and she often measures herself against those. She feels guilty for being annoyed with her children and simultaneously has a need to be honest about her feelings, knowing how difficult they are to express. She feels terrible when talking about her three children and her partner in critical ways, and then realises that mothers need to do so, sometimes, to each other. At times she relaxes and gives herself permission to say and do what she believes is most useful for her, and her family, at the given time.

Jackie believes she must know her children to be able to validate them, for them to be able to grow into intact adults. She pays close attention to their experiential worlds and tries to understand what they are about. She is a tireless campaigner for feeling and expression of feelings. She does not ever want to deny her children their emotional experiences or their voices. She seems to have the ability to sit, endlessly, with them in their pain and sorrow. In this way, she believes, they will know that they are really seen. But she also sees her boy-children being laughed at because they express this soft, so-called feminine side.

Jackie says she has a gender wound. She is acutely aware of the discrepancies between mothers' and fathers' roles in the patriarchal system. She works tirelessly to highlight examples in everyday life, and often offers alternative possibilities through her work as well as her social sphere of influence. She refuses to accept that mothering has everything to do with lists of chores and emotional loads. Her gender role awareness gives her insight into, and explanations for, maternal ambivalence, and sometimes the fantasy of laying down the load just seems so attractive. She is aware of the people around her who help with her mothering role, and that this often implies, in a racially unjust country like South Africa, race relations and power. Jackie is politically progressive and, as with her social action against traditional gender roles, she continuously speaks up and acts hard against racial inequality.

Jackie sometimes allows herself to give in to earthly delights, like eating more chocolates than she believes she should (granted, they are good German ones) and

watching a series on television until her eyes burn. When she tells these stories with a giggle and without apology, I wish I could do more of that too.

Simone

A part of the archetypal mother's job is to give a child a narrative. And that narrative is going to be like a faerie tale, with monsters in it. Shadow and light.

(Simone)

Simone is the cousin with whom I have always danced sensually around the fire and dipped in the ocean before sunrise. I've known her since I've known.

She is a little bit obsessed with her telephone. Not because of the dopamine shots commonly associated with *Pacman* or *Donkey Kong* (or who knows what the games are that people play on their devices nowadays) but because of the constant stream of symbol-upon-symbol that her muses feed into her fingers. She cannot stop processing, hence the constant typing. She generously shares her work; she sings and writes songs for her bread, but maybe more so for the fire with which she bakes the bread.

Simone tells her mother story like she is the last link in a long chain of mother-grandmother-great-grandmother women. She lives in close proximity to her archetypes; she thinks about her roles as nurturer, mother, parent, and wonders whether she is a parent and a mother, or more of one than the other. She believes that mothering is a woman thing, a role shared only amongst women. Nurturing and parenting she can share with the father of her son, but not mothering.

Simone spends time wondering what a good enough mother is, what it looks like to be getting it right. She also wonders about her other roles: as lover, sister, friend. How would she know that she is good enough at them all? She suspects that the mother role and the expectation to not fail at it is amplified in her story because of a cultural embeddedness or social projection onto this role in particular.

She is an earth mother who mothers herself into wellness, all along with the mothering of her son. But there is some dissonance between her longing for an ancient community and her unrelenting independence. If all the women that she likes fail at being excellent at all their roles at once, it must indicate a failing system, not failing women.

Simone dances between the sacredness of life and an absolute delight in irreverence and disobedience. She is a fierce feminist whose minimum requirement of her men is to show up or leave. She does not walk the beaten track. For that her mother once accused her, around the dinner table with her friends, that her son is raised by his father. That moment forced her deeper into enquiry around her disobedience practices. She proclaims and practices social action tirelessly. She questions those who sit on the fence and those who thoughtlessly follow suit. She questions dogmatic belief in traditional cultural roles and identities within a fast-changing society; the opaqueness of expectations and therefore unfair judgement.

Simone experiments with language; finding different ways of saying things, and in so doing she changes the way in which she mothers her son, and in which she defines herself as her son's mother.

Nadine

I guess I do probably feel less pressure because there's another mother, but at the same time, it's not as simple as that. I don't necessarily feel off the hook, you know.

(Nadine)

My story with Nadine started with this study, I did not know her before. Nadine lives in a world of prose and verse; she teaches her students how to read, and understand, stories. (What does one have to do to land that kind of a job?).

Nadine carries the burden of the mothering label; wonders if *parenting* would be lighter if the less gendered role could – as if magically – mean a shared burden. Even though she shares the mothering of her daughter with her wife, she knows that she takes on

a lot of the mothering anyway. Maybe household roles, ungendered, is how she prefers to talk about what they do at home. Maybe being exempt from the traditional mother-father dynamic does relieve both mothers from some pressure. But, she quickly adds, it's not as simple as that. And then we talk some more.

At the beginning of our conversations, she resisted calling herself a mother. She was a parent, adamant to un-gender her role. This was a political position, I think, and later also became an insight into the tremendous expectation, burden, stereotype connected to the mothering role. She delves deep into a part-biography, part-creation of her own mother's internal world, amongst other things. And although Nadine acknowledges this study as an enquiry into mothering, I don't think she will ever give up on the resistance against being called by that name.

Nadine is bashful and very quiet in the group; listening for, rather than offering maternal wisdom. Even though she did not speak often around the table, I am grateful for the guts with which she dived into the deep end of her maternal identity through her WTs. Through her writing she is able to interrogate, provoke, question, pay tribute to, narrate the utterly daunting and deeply rewarding ambivalent mother-world.

Tryfina

I grew up with my grandparents and there were always other cousins, and there was always more than one carer that was part of the parenting team. And I always felt like whenever a new child comes along, all you do is shift up a little bit.

(Tryfina)

I spent three years with Tryfina in group analysis. She never rushed anywhere, even when timeliness was the most important rule in our analysis. She would take her time figuring out the coffee machine in an attempt to dodge the instant sort; she would take her time finding the sunniest winter spot for optimal enjoyment for said coffee; she would take enough time for thorough enjoyment of every drag on her cigarette; she would take all the time she needed to recall last night's dream and the careful retelling of it. The room sometimes became too small for our big emotions on race, gender,

and societal burdens, but together we learned that trying to succeed at life is what we must all do, together. She explains that the pseudonym she chose for herself, Tryfina, is the name that the aunts jokingly call someone who tried to get something right, and never quite did.

She is one of those storytellers that I came across in my childhood storybooks, and that I wished had existed in my own story. One of those who gathered all the children from the village onto her story blanket under the big tree, and who passers-by could hear laughing with the children. She tells her mother stories, even the painful ones, with lightness and animation, as if she understands and accepts that life's sufferings need to be translated into toleration and contentment by the ones who live them. In this humorous vein she would tell many stories, like the one of the day when she ran down the hallway half naked to sort out the sibling rivalry between her children. (She is still not sure whether her flapping boobs or threats of murder gave them the biggest fright, but the fight was sorted out).

She fondly remembers the community of mothers, aunts, grannies who raised her and her crew, and that her mother made it look easy, maybe because there was so much help. She recalls the freedom of playing in the veld, playing with other children, not relying on adults. That nowadays a mother who does not keep an eye on her child, who drops her kids at birthday parties and doesn't join, is frowned upon. Those mothers, who do not allow their children to be free, seem to be the better mothers nowadays. Tryfina fantasises about a mother-life without judgment. She sees, in the judgement that her daughter poses, how she is transmitting, yet again, the judgement that has been transmitted onto her. In a fantastical free life, she, we, would be able to sit with our children and talk freely.

Tryfina has no delusions about her shortcomings as a mother. She knows that she does not get it right all the time. She (in jest?) speaks about herself as one of those mothers whose children will spend many years in therapy talking about their mother. I wonder whether she knows that this insight and her contemplations about her children and herself per definition make her a better mother than many others. She states,

without apology, that she does not even try to be a perfect mother. She does not look cheerful all the time, she does not wear flawless make-up, she does not bake perfect cupcakes for school parties. At some point, she proclaims, she gave up on the supermom business, simply because it is too much work.

Tryfina thinks of mothering in the metaphors that have been following her since preschool. Of Mother Earth; of the strong bodied Black woman who shakes the earth when she walks, the one with the arm so strong that, when you mess with her children, one blow will have you on the ground; of the Sacrificial Mother, who sacrifices everything for her children; of the Logical Abhorrent who kills her children in an attempt to protect; and of the Mother Within – the impossible ideal.

Veronica

My wonderful, beautiful child is occasionally cruel, and maybe because I've occasionally been cruel to her. So, she's probably learned that from me. But then, I learned that back to, back to, back to, back to where millions of human beings first started.

(Veronica)

Our children were small together, our partners have stoked many woodfires in each other's company, I have tapped into her mind and appreciated her full-roundedness throughout the past 15 years.

Veronica teaches others to write, and she writes for a living – so beautifully that I have wondered, at times when judging myself harshly by comparison, why on earth I invited her to participate in this study. But I know exactly why: even though it is a tall order when reading her writing, I learn from her to avoid constant comparison, and at the same time that we are all surprisingly similar in our humanness and motherhood. She does, of course, compare, like humans do. She judges herself and others, but she does reality checks on her comparisons and judgements of herself and others and sees that as normal human behaviour, not to be judged. She accepts that one can be a mother in a whole range of different ways. She does not tend to compare herself to

mothers in the media, but rather to her peers and the characters in all the books she incessantly reads. She believes she gets things wrong sometimes because she is normal. This belief makes her kind to herself and others regarding human error. She realistically places herself, and her child, within humanity.

Veronica is politically liberal, constantly enquiring about the impact of society's investment in heteronormativity and the nuclear family in service of Western life. She has a pervasive gender role awareness. But, concerning relational values, Veronica is conservative. She respects others, is not self-centred, is kind. She is an old-fashioned mother; not overly involved and trusting her child to grow into an independent adult by not over-indulging her.

Although she is not scared to express emotion, and she models emotional expression as normal, she finds it important to link emotions to thoughts, and to pay equal attention to both, not to validate feelings as superior to any other kind of intellectual, emotional, psychological act. She teaches her daughter that we have an intellect, that feeling and thinking cohabit, and she believes that once a child gives voice to a feeling the process of thinking has already begun.

Veronica is conscious of others, and she has an ability to observe. Sometimes I get the idea that she is horrified about how cruel people can be to each other, almost as if she did not think that humans could be like that; a naïveté about how people are supposed to be, because it is nonsensical not to be kind.

Veronica has a rich internal world imbued with humour. She finds things hilarious very often. She laughs at herself and giggles by herself. She is resilient. She knows how to take care of herself, and therefore swims halfway around the planet every morning after the school run.

Cecilia

I love being a mother and try to be a good one to my now 10-year-old daughter. I see myself in her and have such hopes, dreams and aspirations for her to experience a long, rich life well lived.

(Cecilia)

Cecilia was introduced to me by another group member. She has an impressive academic *curriculum vitae*, so I was surprised and thrilled when she agreed to join my study. She is North American. Although she has been living in South Africa for two decades, her Northern identity lies shallow below the surface of her stories, peeping out through her rolled R's, and on full display in reminiscing about her early years as one of four sisters with a super busy mom and a useless dad. Despite these shortcomings, Cecilia feels, in a getting-on-with-it kind of way, that she had a really good childhood. Her home-life descriptions of her abode here in Johannesburg, shared with her partner, her daughter, and the cat, filled with books, overlooking a nearby park, ever-open laptop on desk, remind me of big-city upper middleclass apartment living that is only found in small pockets in this country. She happens, by chance, to be my brother's neighbour, and whenever I walk past her apartment towards his, I cannot help myself but to throw a quick glance through her kitchen window (without curtain or blind, in my defence), wondering whether she would per chance one day be chopping away at the kitchen counter, and looking up at the exact same moment. 'Hello, what brings you to my kitchen window?' she would call out. I would smile sheepishly and remind her of my familial relations next door. I would like to keep contact with her beyond this study.

Cecilia lost both her parents during the past two years; her mother shortly before our first RPM. She entered this study with her grief process raw in her foreground and has been reflecting in our mother-conversations and her own writing on this experience. She now sees many similarities between how she was mothered, how she is doing it, what she wishes to purposely follow, and what she does not want to repeat with her child. She loves being a mother to her 10-year-old daughter – an explicitly expressed position that I do not come across often in conversation with mothers. Not the enjoyment of being a mother, but rather the burdens and ambivalences of mothering more often overshadow conversations. And maybe the obvious assumption that most of us love our children does not translate into our loving the role of mothering them. Therefore, the freshness of Cecilia's position.

She knows the importance of permission to express emotion, and that people would often allow us to do that, for instance through tears, only if we have a good enough reason to do so. If this permission is given inherently by us mothers, and if we could teach our children what emotions are and look like, they may have a better chance of honest, open communication with us and with the world. She has been in love with children's books since attending a workshop some years ago on the emotional language communicated through this genre. That is why one of her above-mentioned bookshelves sags under a huge collection of them, and why they form an integral part of the relationship between her and her daughter.

Cecilia speaks of her only child and pities the mothers around the table who is burdened by sibling rivalry. Despite her daughter's accusations of being denied siblings, and despite her (sometimes, too often?) over-interest in her daughter's internal world, she still believes that this nuclear family is complete.

Mae

Isn't it that when you become a mother you take on the identity of role model? This is your biggest performance ... But of all those other identities that I call myself, they all allow me ... to be myself. So, I can be here, and I can be honest, and I can be who I am and I don't have to impress anyone, or I can choose not to. When it comes to being a mother, I have to, I have to, I have to – lots of have to's ... Can I cry in front of them? Can I scare them? Can I disappoint them? Can I swear? Can I say I don't like something? And all the time, I know that the biggest learning for them will be from when I just am, when I'm not teaching them something, just from how I am every day.
(Mae)

Mae is a full-time mother. I don't mean she does nothing other than being with her children, I mean she does not ever lay down the fact that she is a mother. When I first asked her about her daytime endeavours a year or so ago, she told me that she is academically reading on maternal anxiety in *The Parks*; a cluster of human-planted

leafy suburbs in our city, Johannesburg. They are older, more established hoods with a strong sense of community, where the inhabitants are predominantly liberal, but aware of where you come from and what pedigree you carry. There, when you arrive at a luncheon with new people, you would be asked where you schooled and which schools your kids attend long before you would be asked what you thought of the autumn garden palette or last night's summer storm. Mae negotiates these hoods through an extra layer of her Jewish heritage. The friendly, elderly volunteers who work at the museum where she does a lot of her writing all know her from when she was little. They have known her mother's mothering, they see her mothering, they have raised their own brood, and they know how, and are often not shy enough when it comes to giving advice. She knows judgment from her peers, their mothers, but also from the media, and most harshly from herself. As part of her academic study on maternal anxiety, she closely follows dozens of mothers on popular social media platforms – the so-called *mom-fluencers*. Mae expends enormous amounts of energy on trying to keep her internalised judgement (perhaps enhanced by those mom-fluencers) at bay. She believes that there is a general movement towards honesty about universal mother-struggles, but that the judgment is still around however well mothers are doing their mothering.

Mae is unapologetically, and often angrily feminist. She has a pervasive awareness of how women, as part of a northern global phenomenon, are normally expected to do reproductive labour (the complete load that includes household and children for which one is generally not compensated) as well as, nowadays, productive labour (the salaried office job), and that this load is carried out in an integrated rather than compartmentalised way.

Mae is aware of the transmission of old patterns from ancestors to mothers to their children. She knows that we project our insecurities, anxieties, fears onto our children, and that it is therefore their task to sometimes resist the comforts that we try to offer and that they do not need from us. She knows that she is parenting herself, she is parenting her inner child. Mae has a huge capacity to reflect and to learn.

May Thato

Looking at myself, and how harsh I can be towards myself, I'm learning to be more compassionate... Maybe less controlling and less fear of separation with my children. I think that's what this is, has done for me.

(May Thato)

May Thato is the group's quiet one. I wonder whether it has something to do with the group size. In group psychoanalysis it is widely believed that the ideal group size is not more than eight members. It is believed that in a group of more than eight members at least one member is silenced, spoken on behalf of, believe they have nothing new to contribute. Is May Thato the ninth member? She claimed a mere six pages when I extracted her direct quotes from all the RPM transcripts together, while some other members took up the top end of the twenties. May Thato is a professional woman with a tertiary education and a long career in psychotherapy, and she also carries the intersectional position of a Black, foreign woman in South Africa. In my study, she is one of two members of this sub-group. She is often silenced, not only because of group size, I believe, but also because of race politics. Although her personal story is often silenced in the group, she brings reminders of colonialisation and its effects, directly challenges the group's mostly inherent Eurocentric outlook, reminds us of the nannies and domestic workers who help raise our children and of the silenced women in our society. She reminds us of the danger of a single story (Adichie, 2009). I wonder whether it is easier for May Thato to speak on behalf of our society's silenced women – and by proxy – in this way permits herself to also tell bits of her own story.

May Thato deeply respects intergenerational contact. She is a gentle granny who marvels in her own grandchildren and the babies of her clients, and she tells the gentleness stories of her maternal figures by whom she was raised in a rural part of a neighbouring country. She also expresses her observations, sometimes with frustration, about the differences in their approaches to hers. She is frustrated by the illusive, unobtainable motherhood standard. May Thato is constantly in self-analysis, astonishing me with her insights about herself and the group, and she never fails to

laugh at herself when she believes it is warranted. She speaks an old story-telling language, rich in metaphor, in which mothers are rivers (have you ever seen a river that fails to carry its burden?), and of babies cooking in magical uterus-ovens before they are born.

Although I have known, and occasionally coincided professionally with May Thato for a decade and a half, and recently shared a three-year group analysis with her (both as group members), it took me almost a year to get her character sketch written. What was the difficulty in writing a word sketch of her and still not feeling as if I am doing her justice? I am taking some time in the concluding chapter to interrogate this dynamic.

Now that you know (at least something about) the participants, let me introduce my motivation for a qualitative study and offer a step-by-step guide to how I go about it.

4. THE RESEARCH DESIGN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

4.1 A Social Construct: How the Process Guided the Content the Wrong Way Around

An important part of social constructionist auto/biographical research and its ethical considerations is it being an iterative process (Maguire, 2014). An ongoing factor in working with RPs was to respect their stories, listen to their data, check and re-check with them whether I got it right, not search for my own agenda and themes from the general literature on maternal identity. One way of obtaining this goal was to do this study *the wrong way around*. Traditionally I would have read existing literature on maternal identity, found themes, gathered data, and (of course) found these themes in the data if I was determined to do so. (The concept of finding in the data what the researcher is looking for, to confirm existing literature, i.e. confirmation bias, taps into the power relationships between researcher, researched, and knowledge production. This is an issue inherently opposed in auto/biography, with a focus on the role of self-reflection, amongst others. This issue directly relates to the politics of epistemology. See Chapter 2).

The wrong way around meant me not reading outside literature before completing the data collection process; in other words, only after the completion of the five WTs and five RPMs, did I start reading outside literature on maternal identity. This was an exercise in delayed gratification, a great challenge to refrain from reading the dozens of articles and watching the films that my family, friends, and the other RPs suggested throughout. It was also an opportunity to *hear* the data, to respect my own and the other RPs' stories. I have learned the significance of respect for the data through auto/biography (Parsons & Chappell, 2020), and through collecting data before reading existing literature (this suggestion is one of my supervisor's most significant contributions to my study).

4.2 Process of Enquiry

Bless et al. (2013) state that qualitative researchers are curious about how people experience themselves, their relationships, and their social contexts. They are interested in seeing how people make sense of their own realities, their own subjective truths, and how they construct meaning. Auto/Biography, social constructivism, and the narrative approach have all informed my decision to apply qualitative research methods in my exploration of sense-making through my own, as well as others' stories. Narrative research approaches are not limited to a specific set of data collection and data analysis methods, and qualitative research often uses text as research material (Flick, 2007).

For my study the data corpus comprises three data sets, namely a set of five WTs per RP (all the RPs did not submit all five WTs, and I received a total of 34 WTs), five transcripts of the five RPMs (a total of 159 pages, 74 060 words of transcribed group conversations), and my reflective journal. The group process started with a WT, the title of which I decided on:

Write the story of you as a mother, the version that you wish to tell today (roughly 1000-2500 words).

All RPs received the others' stories only *after* they had written their own, and before the first in-person RPM. The first RPM (RPM1) followed two weeks after reading each other's WT1. I audio-recorded and transcribed RPM1. So, after RPM1 I had two primary data sets, WT1 and the transcript of RPM1, with my third data set (my personal reflective journal) developing throughout the process. We repeated this process five times over an eight-month period. I only decided on the topic of WT1, thereafter the group decided at the end of each RPM what the following WT would be. The topics chosen by the RPs in group consultation were: WT2: A repetition of WT1, WT3: Judgement, WT4: Fiction, and WT5: A reflection on the entire writing and RPMs process. Only once did I receive all WTs back, I distributed them amongst all the RPs to read before the next RPM.

The RPMs had no set agenda. I asked the group to reflect on their personal writing processes as well as on their reactions in reading the other RPs' stories. Non-directive, free-associative conversations took place during the RPMs, often with a focus on our personal reflections on writing our own and reading the other RPs' work.

During this process of enquiry, I repeatedly saw the focus of the study moving on a continuum, as explained by Brennan and Letherby (2017) from an *auto/biography* towards an *auto/biography*, and back; moving between my own stories (*auto/biography*) and those of the other participants with an awareness of my subjective reader-position (*auto/biography*).

Reflective Journal (while transcribing the recording of RPM1, February 2022)

I am humbled by the idea that I can't push my own agenda. I need to keep quiet and listen to the process and your stories. I spoke a lot during the first session, can do much less of that still.

I am not in control.

I have no idea what my first creative writing piece will look like, so I need to trust the process, that something will come to me through the material. This is very new, and I am nervous.

It feels like free falling. Trust!

Taps into my deep humility in being part of this process. Also, this feeling in therapy with my patients sometimes, and overwhelmingly so in raising my children. That they chose me to mother them, and that I am privy to some of their experiences, thoughts, development. Deeply meaning making.

4.3 My Study, Step-by-Step

1. I had initial phone conversations with potential RPs.
2. Then followed formal individual meetings with potential RPs.
3. After the meetings, I wrote letters to potential RPs, including a general introduction of the study and planned procedures, a confidentiality agreement, and an opting out clause.
4. I then sent participants the brief for WT1.
5. Two weeks later each RP submitted their WT1.
6. After I received all the WT1s, I sent them to all the RPs. Only then did the participants read each other's WT1s (therefore, after submitting their own, and before RPM1).
7. We held RPM1 two weeks after they submitted their WT1s. In a conversation at the end of RPM1, the RPs decided together on the topic for WT2.
8. I transcribed RPM1 in the days immediately after RPM1.
9. We repeated this process of WTs and RPMs four more times: A total of five WTs per participant, and five RPMs (with a few omissions and absentees in between).
10. I wrote creatively throughout this process (including I-poetry, free-form poetry, polyphonic composite characters' stories, character sketches, and

my own autobiographical stories). I shared relevant writings to RPs and family members where they were implicated, throughout the process, asking for editing, co-construction, and approval.

11. After the last RPM, I reread all the raw data chronologically, confirming themes that evolved from the data.
12. After this reading, I resent all RPs their own I-poems, character sketches, and other material related to their own writing to again edit, co-construct, and approve.
13. Only then did I do a literature review related to themes that emerged from the primary data. Although I was aware of some of the literature before, this was my first active reading of literature, related to my study but outside the data.
14. Then followed the formal writing process, comprising all chapters included in this thesis.

4.4 What to do with the Data?

Qualitative data often takes the form of unstructured texts, produced by unstructured interviews and focus groups, as well as through the analysis of letters, speeches, and so on (Bless et al., 2013). Biographical and narrative data for research (and other) purposes can be spoken, written, or visual in form (Parsons & Chappell, 2020). Auto/Biographic data can be text-based or 'more explicitly arts-based' (Grant, 2023: 67). Davidson and Letherby (2020) further explore different ways of telling academic stories. They cite Richardson who considers writing as 'a method of enquiry' (ibid.: 65). Instead of only using writing to report on, or tell about, the social world, Richardson sees writing as 'a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis ... Form and content are inseparable' (ibid.). Grant believes that auto/biographic knowledge is 'more made than found; experimenting with different ways of writing, including prose and poetic forms, can produce different kinds of epistemic insights' (2023: 69).

The qualitative research methods that I used in this study are purposive sampling (see above for a discussion on my choice of the group), non-directive, open-ended in-person group conversations (RPMs), thematic content analysis of the recorded RPM

transcripts and WTs, my own autobiographical writings, character sketches of the RPs, polyphonic composite characters' stories, free-form poetry inspired by the data, and I-poetry from the WTs.

4.4.1 Thematic Content Analysis

I used thematic content analysis to identify, analyse, and report on specific patterns that I found in the RPM transcripts and WTs (Scharp & Sanders, 2018). I was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative method of thematic analysis in familiarising myself with the data through repeated readings, generating themes as they emerged from the data, defining and naming (and often renaming) the themes as they emerged and changed, and locating examples from the data in support of each theme. Braun and Clarke underpin their method by a 'distinctly qualitative research philosophy' that highlights the importance of the subjectivity of the researcher as a resource rather than seeing it as a burden to be managed, the value of the researcher's reflective stance, and the uniquely contextual nature of meaning (2018: 107). They specifically locate their approach within a qualitative research paradigm, rather than merely seeing it as a qualitative technique within a positivist approach (ibid.). As part of my own politics of epistemology, I specifically chose this approach as it complements the value of ethical subjective knowledge creation.

4.4.2 Autobiography

In this auto/biographical study I am using some of my own *auto*/biographical, in other words, life-story material as a research data set. I wrote the autobiographical poem below to describe the span of my life-chapter from just before I started my study up to the liberation I feel in its completion.

Mid-life crisis

Mind-Life crisis

Id(entity) crisis

Ethics-frame-dogma-frame-ethics-frame-Truth!

(Fuck off) super-ego (crisis)

Narrate

Polyphonic

My story

(Y)our story?

Voice!

Vry Vrou

(sotto voce)

VOICE!

(Van der Walt, E. M., unpublished)

4.4.3 Character Sketches

My writing character sketches of the RPs (see above) had a two-fold motivation. Firstly, in auto/biographical research the attempt is for the reader to recognise the RPs' characters as familiarly human; a reminder that we, as human beings – or in this case, as mothers – are not alone. Our struggles and delights do not only belong to our unique stories but are part of our mother condition. In this recognition lies the possibility for reality checks regarding our own experiences. An important theme discussed in Chapter 7 is that of mothers feeling abnormal/mad/even psychotic as part of the patriarchal mechanism. Introducing the reader to so-called normal mothers who have so-called abnormal mothering experiences could potentially be a great relief, and one of the contributions of this study (see the discussion on projective identification in Chapter 8). The second motivation for writing character sketches complements the uniqueness of auto/biography as research approach. Although I created polyphonic composite characters in this study partly to protect the RPs' intimate material and to hinder the reader from matching specific stories to specific RPs, I found it necessary to introduce the reader to real people-participants.

As is clear from the character sketches, I have had, and still have, relationships with some of the RPs before and outside this study. However, for the purpose of staying as close as possible to the data, I wrote the character sketches from the RPM transcripts. In this way, I tried to sketch characters of the people as they participated in the RPMs rather than from my relationships with them before and outside the study.

I highlighted all the direct quotes in the five RPM transcripts from each RP, then copied these quotes into eight separate documents (one for each RP). I reread each RPs contributions to the RPMs, and used this material as inspiration for the character sketches. From there I elaborated here and there to create coherent stories. As mentioned, I used pseudonyms that were chosen by the RPs themselves in the character sketches and throughout the study.

4.4.4 Polyphonic Composite Characters' Stories

For the sake of relational ethics and confidentiality around the most sensitive material in this study, I created polyphonic composite fictional characters. Their stories are creations that come from my own auto/biographical tales intertwined with those of the other RPs. I attempt to tell true experiences while sometimes omitting parts of stories and changing details. These techniques are commonly used in storytelling from auto/biographic and autoethnographic stances (Ellis, 2007). The effect of a polyphonic composite character's story is that the reader thinks it a typical story that could belong to anyone, but often stories that would not be told because of their risqué nature. The aim is for the reader to better understand or an identify with a particular group of people; in this case, mothers.

4.4.5 Free-Form Poetry

What is most true is poetic. What is most true is naked life. I can only attain this mode of seeing with the aid of poetic writing. I apply myself to 'seeing' the world nude, that is, almost to e-nu-merating the world, with the naked, obstinate, defenceless eye of my nearsightedness. And while looking very very closely, I copy. The world written nude is poetic (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997: 3).

In my *auto*/biographical writings I have adopted a free-flow prose-poetry mumbling-writing. In the process of writing creatively for this study, I would often read a part of

the data and feel a story brooding somewhere – as if in a dream-state – before it entered my conscious mind. Without knowing a plot or even an outline, I would start writing a story. The product is often a text without much interruption or censorship, with a protagonist close to a part of me or one of the other RPs. This would be the first round. Numerous rereadings and rewritings with consideration of relational ethics, suitability, and appropriateness for the study would result in the poems and stories included in this final text. ‘The act of writing alters the way we think about what we know and how we know it’ (Pelias, 2016: 25).

4.4.6 I-Poetry

I-poems are excerpts from written or transcribed material in which an RP describes her lived experience. The I-poems I wrote for this study are direct excerpts from the RPs’ WT, in other words, our own words that I chiselled from longer texts into poetry format. I produced each I-poem by reading through an RP’s specific WT, highlighting all the uses of the first person ‘I’ and the following verb with its important accompanying text. How many accompanying words I included after the verb was intuitive; my own judgement of what was important to include for the I-poem to capture the essence of the writer’s sense of self. I then copied the highlighted phrases from the WT, pasting them in exact chronological order as they occurred in the original text, placing them in separate lines in poem-format. I then reread the I-poems multiple times, further deleting unnecessary text. The product is a distillation of the writer’s voice in talking about herself, a text stripped from any noise (Edwards & Weller, 2012; Letherby et al., 2016). I wrote a few I-poems from my own writings and found them too curated. I did not tell the other RPs before the fact that I would be writing I-poems from their WT, and I believe that this way of writing contributed to the honesty of their I-poems, making them true representations of the writers’ voices.

4.5 How the Text Affects the Reader

In *Actual Minds. Possible Worlds* (1986) Bruner wonders *what* actually produces whatever the effects are on the reader. The effect on the reader is also an important contribution in auto/biographical research (read Hillary, 2020 for a fascinating

illustration). How and in what ways this final text affects the reader is something that I would have wished to discover but lies beyond the scope of this project. I will not know what the subjective elements and effect of this text is on an outside reader. What I do know is the effects that the RPs' texts have had on me in reading them, and on the other RPs as far as they have shared their reading experiences. An important part of the co-constructive group process in my study was our reading of each other's work, noticing the effects of the reading on all of us, and reporting on these effects in the RPMs as well as responding to them in their follow-up WTs.

I wrote side notes throughout the data collection process as part of my personal reflective journal. Some of these notes are hypothetical letters to other RPs, like my comment to Jackie when she admitted not always being on top of school-mom matters: 'You are not alone! I thought you had a better grip on school than I have. How my fantasies are based on self-judgment rather than reality checks'. Sometime later she reflected on a few good weeks she had had with her children: 'Weeks where we could dance at times, where we made silly jokes, where we played. Where there was openness and acceptance'. 'I feel very touched', I reflected, 'and secretly wonder whether this research process can take even a little bit of credit?' She continued with a personal disclosure where she told that at a certain moment, she understood herself a bit better: 'Diverting attention to make things go away. Be it through work or wine'. 'I am overwhelmed by your honesty', I wanted to say. And finally, she wrote:

It makes me excited to engrain some patterns in the being of me and my children as we co-journey this thing called life. Knowing that the process is messy and imperfect, and that sometimes things just is. And that the unbearable wonderful task of being a mother is to witness it, and to hold it (Jackie, WT1).

My response to her was: ‘Unbearable, yes. Yet, every time I miraculously remembered to hold my daughter mid-tantrum and to breathe, to ground myself, I knew that I could survive her intensity. That my surviving would make it possible for her too’.

‘Characters in a story are said to be compelling by virtue of our capacity for identification’ (Bruner, 1986: 4). My auto/biographical story speaks on behalf of a small group of RPs. It is clear from above extracts that other mothers read my texts and are emotionally touched because my story part-resonates with them. I have said before that Strauss wrote for ‘trustworthy acquaintances and reasonable friends’ (1952: 23). I do not live in his political climate where writers had no choice but to know who to trust as their safety depended on it, but I do live in a society where my voice sometimes feels alienated under patriarchal norm, and where I therefore choose to write with worthy acquaintances and like-minded friends, and with the hope to reach opponents who are openminded enough to be challenged by the text. Bruner speaks about Wolfgang Iser’s reader response criticism in literary theory; the idea that readers create ‘virtual text[s]’ in the reading of a story that triggers something in the reader’s own life story (1986: 6). I am co-creating in this text an amalgamation of many voices across different genres, including autobiography in prose and free-form poetry, I-poetry, character sketches, and polyphonic compound characters’ stories. The product is a text in which I write about myself and the other RPs, and by virtue of these writings, also about others. Ellis believes that ‘when we write about ourselves, we also write about others’ (2007: 14; so does Morgan, 2020, as mentioned earlier). As said, this text speaks on behalf of a larger group of (m)others. A wider recognition is possible of stories for a wider group of readers, according to Barthes’ ‘writerly text’ (Bruner, 1986: 4). (Also see the discussion on projective identification and the reader in Chapter 8).

5. CONCLUSION

Accepting that the personal and knowledge creation are political (Parsons & Chappell, 2020; Letherby, 1994, 2015), I started this chapter with an argument on the ethical implications of auto/biography as research approach. I then introduced the group and how I chose each RP, and I introduced each one personally through character

sketches. I discussed the design of this qualitative research study under the process of enquiry, how this social constructionist process guided the content the wrong way around, and the different ways in which I used the data in thematic content analysis, autobiography, character sketches, polyphonic composite characters' stories, free-form poetry, and I-poetry. I concluded with a discussion on the possible effects of a text on the reader, and specifically how it can be applied to this text.

In Chapter 5 I draw on my auto/biographical data to define motherhood as a category within the patriarchal institution. I define mother as a title, and what it means to be named, and called, mother. I also describe the mothering role and what this role entails. I further refer to the division of labour, the mental load, and allomothering – how mothers raise their children within social structures. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on a Western hierarchy within which biological mothers, adoptive mothers, non-mothers, and others are not seen as equals.

CHAPTER FOUR-PLUS-A-BIT or FIVE-MINUS-SOME: INTERLUDE – A PAUSE BEFORE THE DATA

Reflective Journal (June 2023)

I recently read an article in the popular media by investigative journalist and feminist campaigner, Julie Bindel, in which she mentioned that a certain British charity organisation had, in their most recent language guide, replaced the term expectant mother with people who become pregnant (Bindel, 2023). Is expectant mother no longer a concept (in that context, anyway), or are expectant mothers offensive, too exclusionary in this political climate, are women who have fallen pregnant still allowed to refer to themselves in this way without being offensive? Am I allowed to ask these questions out loud or to even wonder about them in private? I asked the opinion of a Swedish colleague who is working in a social support centre for adoptive and foster parents. 'You are old-fashioned, conservative, and boring, Esther, we have not spoken or written about these concepts in decades.' In Sweden, she says, they simply think about carers or caregivers. A mother is no longer a thing. Her comments forced me into rethinking this study that I have been busy with for an extensive period of time. What am I doing studying maternal identity if mothers do not exist anymore? And, more importantly, what made me decide on this endeavour in the first place? I stepped back. I thought of the 11 members in the writing group that I am part of, from 11 countries, each one responding uniquely to my question whether mother is still a thing. I realised the importance of the specific context within which this study has taken shape. I live in Africa, not in Sweden, and not even in the UK where my supervisor and Julie Bindel are. I remembered all the mothers' stories that I have been hearing all the years in my practice room. Different stories with similar themes: what is a mother expected to be and by whom?; all the ambivalences mothers live with; their transgressions of the norms (or their fantasies of transgression); society's punishment through guilt, shame, and expulsion; the brave ones' stories of reaction, challenge, and (at least a certain degree of) freedom. I thought of similar stories that the RPs shared through their participation in this study. Even though we had many discussions of what mothers are and whether we want to be called by that name, not once had

any of the RPs questioned the mother concept and its relevance. I also remembered my children, my mother, and me.

An interjection from Gayle:

When Esther told me of the comment made by her Swedish colleague I was annoyed. I felt protective of Esther and her respondents for whom motherhood/ing is most certainly a status and experience that necessitates pause and reflection. Furthermore, it wearied me that once again I was having to respond to the lack of thought, the lack of care, from someone who, it seems, has never had to pause or reflect on the taken for granted expectation that all women should be and will be mothers. I was then personally affronted as well as wanting to reassure Esther that her work was valid, significant, necessary. I might be wrong. I might be misjudging. But from my conversation with Esther about this exchange I think not. Her colleague was not, I don't think, embracing the term carer to get away from the divide between (biological) mothers and others. Neither was she challenging the hierarchy of motherhood which values some mothers more than others, and strongly suggests that other mothers are bad mothers merely because of their material, social and sexual circumstances. Thus, although Esther's colleague seemed to have suggested that Esther was being less than inclusive by not including all who *care* in her comment, I would argue, that this denies not only the heavily gendered nature of the experience of motherhood and mothering but also the privilege of some who are able to choose this experience even if not in conditions of their own

making. In sum, yet again the political dimensions of both mother and nonmother were being ignored and dismissed.

I do not often write about my children.

Not because I think my pen lacks material from them (material abounds!)

Or because I do not find them interesting (I am amazed at them. I'm mesmerised by them every day.)

Or that they are just normal (thank heavens. isn't that exactly what I want them to be?)

Or that they are not extraordinary superhumans (of course they are, like other parents think theirs too.)

I do not often write about my children.

I try, but when I lift the pen nothing happens.

Actually, several things happen:

My chest closes up

My heart pulsates

Hands quiver

Sweaty palms dry mouth reptile brain scared scared SCARED.

I do not often try to write about my children.

Are they beyond words?

Wait.

I just had something in mind.

What was it again?

No, those words are not working here.

I do not often try to write about my children.

I have recently started writing about my mother (it was after sending her something I wrote about her)

She responded

Extensively

Firstly, by asking my permission (of course, I would be delighted)

Then by stating her position,

reminding me of factually correct historical events,

showing interest in my points of view

my insights

opinions

proclamations

judgements

Truth.

I have recently started writing about my mother.

She can hear me (I think that is why I have recently started writing about my mother).

I often write about me, mother (you roll your eyes? Sometimes I do too. Then I get stuck).

Now, after rolling my eyes about me writing about me, mother, I am stuck.

I often write about me, mother (my Cixous idol made it her work to write the impossible into writing. The impossible into writing).

I will often try to write about my children.

I find it unthinkable to do the babies-with-bathwater stunt and start anew with a different study. I simply have to stand my ground and continue believing that I am doing the mother-work woman-work I need to be doing in my context. But where to from here?

Back from rethinking my study: in the country where I live, for the people who tell me their stories, and for me in my everyday experiences of myself, my mother, and my offspring, mother is (still) a thing. A big thing.

If I believe that mothers still exist and that maternal identity is worth an entire study, a few concepts need defining. I have decided to stay close to the language of my study; that is the language of my research participants, the literature that I was – by the study – lead towards reading, the language of my academic pen, and of my heart. I have made this decision with the utmost respect to the data, even though I am under no illusion that this study will represent and do justice to all mothers' stories. This is only a thin stratum that forms a small part of the universal mother story.

CHAPTER 5: DEFINING MOTHER AND MORE

1. INTRODUCTION

I started Chapter 4 accepting that the personal is political, and that knowledge creation is also political (Parsons & Chappell, 2020; Letherby, 1994, 2015). Because of this, I considered the ethical considerations of auto/biography as a research approach in detail at the beginning of Chapter 4. I continued with an introduction to the group and why I chose each RP and provided a character sketch of each RP. I discussed my qualitative research study's design and concluded with a discussion on the possible effects of a text on the reader.

After completing Chapter 4 I had an interaction with a Swedish colleague who thought my study outdated, belonging to a previous century. She did not believe that *mother* is still a thing. In a short interlude I shared a few musings from my reflective journal that I wrote in response during an existential thesis-writing crisis. I include my supervisor's response as a further interlude in my interlude.

In Chapter 5, drawing on my auto/biographical data, I explore the definition of mother as a title; what it means to be named (and called) mother – whether defined through biology, identity, or social agreement. I further discuss the mothering role, mother as a verb, and what this role entails. With reference to mothering I refer to the traditionally gendered division of labour, to the mental load more often carried by mothers than fathers, and allomothering (how mothers cope by raising their offspring within social structures). I end the chapter with the idea that there is, in the Western world that we (RPs) inhabit, a hierarchy in which biological mothers, adoptive mothers, non-mothers, and others do not carry equal social clout. Mother(hood) and mothering can never be divorced from the political context within which it has been, and constantly is, moulded.

2. DEFINING MOTHERHOOD

It is important to differentiate between mother as person, mothering as the experience or actions of a mother, and the institutional status of motherhood (Jarvie, Letherby, & Stenhouse, 2015). In this section I define motherhood.

Rich (2021/1976) attributes two meanings to motherhood. Firstly, she refers to motherhood as the (potential) relationship between a woman and her biological ability to reproduce, and to her (potential) child. Secondly, she refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that assures that this potential between woman (potential mother), procreation, and child – and women in general – stay under male control. Rich opens her major work, *Of Woman Born* (2021/1976) by saying ‘all human life on the planet is born of woman’ yet, motherhood as an institution has been created by ‘the sons of the mothers’ (ibid.: lix). The irony is not lost. She suggests that the male mind (as collective stereotype) is haunted by the overwhelming idea that man’s life/existence itself is dependent on women. Rich defines the institution as a social structure with established laws, customs, and practices that may be externally (she suggests male) enforced. In *The Patriarchs* (2023: 2), Saini attempts to define patriarchy. She admittedly fails, acknowledges the desire for a historical precedent, and continues with a version of its history. Saini says patriarchy is the word we now use to describe women’s oppression. This word has become:

Devastatingly monolithic, drawing in all the ways in which women and girls around the world are abused and treated unfairly, from domestic violence and rape to the gender pay gap and moral double standards ... Gendered oppression begins to look like one vast conspiracy stretching all the way back into deep time (ibid.).

The highly emotive nature of Saini’s and Rich’s, and many other feminists’ attempted definitions may be a clue to the frustration and sometimes hopelessness of many women’s lives under male control. In reality, this seeming conspiracy is also an internal

and often unconscious learned way of being that has been fed to both girls and boys for an eternity. (See Saini, 2023, for a detailed history of patriarchy).

Early in the previous century Catholic feminist and gender essentialist, Edith Stein (1891-1942) believed that although 'women can possess the virtues' that are normally seen as male, she still promulgated that 'the natural vocation of a woman is motherhood, for her physical characteristics are made for the reproduction and nourishing of children' (Dragseth, 2015: 20-21). Stein's pledge was for the essential difference *and* equality between women and men. Beauvoir sarcastically responds to the gender essentialist view with 'Woman? Very simple, say the fancier of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is female – this word is sufficient to define her' (1953/1949: 35). Beauvoir agrees with Stein that a woman's 'physiological destiny', her 'natural calling', is fulfilled in maternity because of her organic structure (ibid.: 501). But, then she continues with what is to become a significant feminist decree, by adding that 'human society is never abandoned wholly to nature' (ibid.). Jarvie et al. (2015: 105) also refer to the historical representation of the natural, rightful role of mothers 'by virtue of their capacity to bear children', that motherhood is constructed as 'a rite of passage' into complete womanhood, and that it is 'glorified as women's chief vocation'. Rich (2021/1976) does not agree that motherhood is necessarily instinctual or natural for all women, and that it is the primary task of all women. (More below on where Stein's gender essentialism leaves women who are not able to- or choose not to procreate).

Before continuing with mothers and their expected and/or chosen roles within this system, I explain what I mean with the term mother as a title ascribed to any individual woman.

3. DEFINING MOTHER

Reflective Journal (October 2023)

Does mothering something other than a biological human child (e.g. your puppy) make you a human mother? My friend insists that he is a mother by virtue of his interrupted

sleep during the potty-training phase of his new puppy. Why do many men roll their eyes, and even more women feel offended when someone like him calls himself a mother? Would the self-ascribed title be more acceptable if my friend were a woman (whether by biology or identification)? Does it have something to do with women earning the title through pregnancy and/or birth and/or breast/bottle feeding and/or mothering and/or raising their children for many years? Can only a woman (whether by biology or identification) be a mother? What about a biological female who identifies as a man and then conceives, gestates, and gives birth to a child? Is this parent the father or the mother of the child?

An attempt to define the term mother cannot be done from a single perspective and outside of time and political context. I am offering definitions through biology, identity, and social agreement. Biologically speaking a mother is defined as the female parent of a child through conception and/or birth. Conception can happen with or without medical assistance. Whether the child is born alive or still, does not matter. Whether the mother has a parental relationship with the child after birth, also does not matter. In the instance of gestational surrogacy, the surrogate mother is seen (in British Law) as the mother of the child (although surrogacy agreements are not binding in the UK as in many other countries) (Ashenden cited by Madhok, 2013). In other words, because the woman who gives birth to a child is regarded as the mother, a woman who acts as gestational carrier of a child for someone else is regarded as the mother, even though she is the child's surrogate mother. A woman who donates ova (egg cells) to another woman is genetically regarded as the child's mother. From the above it is clear that surrogacy, ova donation, together with other reproductive technologies, create the possibility of multiple mothers for one child (gamete donor, gestational mother, and social mother). One child can be the product of two or three differently designated mothers, and an encompassing definition of mother is therefore multi-fold (ibid.).

The biological mother can withdraw from the child after its birth, for whatever reason, and the raising of the child can be taken over by another non-biological female parent. From this point onwards, the purely biological stance will not suffice. Even after dying,

actively rejecting, or involuntarily giving up her biological child (as well as her mother title, i.e. her identification as mother), a biological mother will still be called the mother. Now the mother definition includes a mother who has not birthed her child, but who is raising it.

The current dynamic gender and general identity debate makes it impossible for any definition to stand the test of time. So, just for now, and for the purpose of my study, I am defining a mother as the female (whether biological or through identification) parent of a human child, whether through genetic, gestational, and/or social avenues. In the case of adoptive mothers, I am adding to the definition a prolonged relationship between the mother and her adopted child.

We (RPs) are indecisive about this matter of mother as female parent. Some of us express uncertainty and tentative thinking about the differences between mother and parent, between mother and father, and often in terms of the mothering (or parenting) role (which is discussed in more detail later in this chapter). Simone says:

For me there's a feeling that mothering is a woman thing ... Everything [that] is shared by the masculine, the feminine, and whoever else, is the parent ... So, I can be a parent, but that's a shared role with my husband. I'm in the role of that, it can be part of my identity. But I am with women in the mother role, not with the man. He can be a nurturer; he is not a mother. That's how I construct it ... So, for me, there's nurturer, there's mother, there's parent. That's my construct. I mean, that's just a perspective ... I never thought about it until we started [speaking] here, that there's this parenting- and mother thing that I'm actually quite curious about. Sometimes I state things as if it is what I absolutely [believe] ... [But] actually, I'm trying to figure out where I stand. So, I take in a position and

from there I start looking ... All I know is I can just speak from the bloody story that was given me. That's mine. And it's a woman, a mother is a woman for me. Because of that, it will always be. It's not a thinking thing. It's just an association (RPM1).

Nadine reflects on the first WT with 'it's funny, when I got to the end ... of my piece I shifted from mother to parent' (RPM1). Is she, like other RPs, uncertain about the difference between mother and parent, or does she feel ambivalent about calling herself a mother and with it taking on the mental load of this mother identity as well as this mothering role? Nadine answers this question with a further reflection:

I thought it's partly because I don't want this to be just on mothers ... Why is it only women who have to play that role? In fact, if I think about it as a parent rather than mother, it kind of takes that burden away from an ... exclusively female ... obviously, we're talking about motherhood, but by the end [of the WT], I wanted to change it to parenting, so that'll be less gendered (RPM1).

In the I-poem that I wrote from Mae's first WT, her appreciation, almost reverence, towards this part of herself is clear. She speaks to her mother title as well as her identity as mother, the emotional load of this story, her mothering role, and also the larger motherhood category and the pressures and responsibilities associated with it:

I am Beyond Appreciative (Mae, WT1)

I can't quite believe I am that – mother

I have a sense of being a child still myself

I am, in fact, the mother of two small children

*I dig a little deeper
I'm their mom, of course
I make the decisions
I have the emotional load
I am storing much information about these two. The motherload
I like that*

*I am a mother
I feel incredible love and flood of emotion
I would like to add: one never really has control
I am there, between them, trying to balance*

*I feel like saying it's a painful love
I need them so much
I suppose underneath that is fear
I have no doubt this story is my birth story:*

*I was born in Israel to a South African mother, alone
I was immediately taken away and patched up
I was a large, darker skinned and very hairy baby. Despite that
I was, indeed, her baby*

*I was taken away from the only care I had known in utero
I lost my mother before I had her
I am convinced, fear*

*I became an adult
I started to shift that fear: boyfriends, husband, my own children
I deal with this fear in myself*

*I am a mother
I am a woman, a wife, teacher, student, friend, a Jew(ish) woman, White woman,*

a South African woman

The mother I am right now

I'm not the same as I was before

I became a mother. There are parts

I felt were dormant

I am grateful, recovering-discovering old and new bits of who

I am, what

I want

*I sometimes feel as if the sense of excitement at what I could possibly become or do
has vanished*

I'm married. I have kids. Done.

I feel society's pressure

I am deeply privileged, make choices

I know that

I am doing that in having returned to studying

I do in all spaces of my life, inform.

I feel

I am constantly working on the things that trigger

I suppose ... my children feel loved, they thrive

I love them to the extreme. How do

I love them well?

I have constant dialogue with myself

I am beyond appreciative

Being a mother (identity, the mother title), and mothering (the verb, doing mothering things), are often intertwined in our RP conversations. We have had many conversations in the interface between being and doing. Jennifer Croft, Tokarczuk's translator, describes that in-between translation space as a third language between Polish and English (Croft, 2023). I am beginning to see that the being and doing of

mothers are not as neatly separable as my chapter sub-headings suggest, and that there is, indeed, an in-between third language in writing and telling our mother stories. Nadine dabbles in this interface, this third language, with her first WT. Here is the I-poem I wrote from it:

I am More Likely to be Curious (Nadine, WT1)

I will start with a story of a slightly reluctant mother

I would never have managed

I might pause at this initial reluctance or ambivalence

I am (un)able to understand fully

I might have explained

I am not sure how much ... is true

I recognise

I was slightly detached

I was happy to be a part of it

I am not sure what to make of that.

I see my feelings of ambivalence. Fear:

I did not have the capacity to love as a mother. Anxiety:

I had made (precious space) for myself

I sprang into action

I had a mother in my head

I suppose this gave me a structure

I knew about the things

I had to do

I boiled butternut squash

I made sure

I discovered later

I did not give enough space

I watched

I understand now

I would(n't) have thought

I had inherited the parenting pattern

I look back

I ... struggled to understand her love

I am conscious of not repeating

I might think

I am also not dismissive

I think

I ... find hard

I feel like

I wonder if

I think

I had two big work deadlines

I worked

I had to rethink

I decided

I become more relaxed

I think

I find the mothering

I am fascinated

I have tried to control

I am hopeful

I am more likely to be curious

I am still concerned

I will be clamouring for attention, soon.

Garbes reckons that although mother is an important identity for many women who are the main caregivers, she considers the work of raising children as mothering ‘an action that includes people of all genders and nonparents alike’ (2022: 9). In the next section I explore the definition of mothering as acts and experiences, as a verb.

4. DEFINING MOTHERING

In my study, mothering refers to the acts and experiences of being a mother. Mothering is what you do when you are a mother. Knott describes mothering as ‘the visceral ongoingness, the blood and guts of being “with child”. The verbs. “Mother” as a verb’ (2019: xiii). Knott says that verbs have a specific relationship with anecdotes. Mothers talk about being mothers through telling mothering tales (feeding, bathing, doing school runs, shopping, baking cupcakes). She believes that thinking in verbs helps mothers and others to ‘diversify and to particularize what is otherwise easily mistaken as purely natural or biological, necessary or mundane’ (2019: 265-266). The ‘necessary’ and ‘mundane’ was a regular topic of conversation amongst us during the RPMs, mostly with an undertone of fed-up, taken-for-granted mothers. I read this as an indication that mothering tasks without a sense of mother-meaning often create resentment, underappreciation, undervalue, a sense that mother should be more meaningful than what can be created through only doing the mothering. Winnicott says to mothers not to expect their children to thank them for having them and caring for them (1986), Garbes believes that one of the luxuries of her childhood was to remain oblivious of all the work that went into her mother’s raising her (2022), and Knott says that a mother’s love is her expected contribution to society, it is unrequited (‘until the baby smiles at you for the first time, or out of the blue’, 2019: 94).

Angela Neustatter (1989) believes that a grave mistake of the women’s movement is that it has done nothing to increase the seeming importance of childcare in society. One fallout of this is that women are grouped together with their small children (think mummies and toddlers in the park, at the playgroup, in below-standard restaurants with play pens). Lazarre writes (1976) about the *womenandchildren* subgroup in a male-dominated world, describing her days as ‘all rolling around me in a circle, each one, though differing in detail, an exact replica of the one before’ (1976: 101). One of

Neustatter's participants says that because she chose to stay at home to raise her own child, she is 'treated as though [she has] had [her] brain removed' (1989: 87). Her childrearing work, she says, is especially seen by working women as unimportant. Although the above sources were written respectively three and five decades ago, I read in our RP conversations that this is still an unfinished project. But, the reverse is also the case, in that doing the mothering tasks forces some women into being mothers – maybe especially those who resist the title as part of their changed identity? (See Nadine's I-poem, *I am More Likely to be Curious*, above). Lazarre recalls her consideration to join a particular women's group during her early mothering years 'which might possibly include both halves of my painfully divided self. I still considered myself a feminist, but being a mother [doing the mothering work] was consuming my life' (1976: 44). Despite a tribe of feminist matrilineal ancestors, Lazarre continues, she had 'fallen victim to the most conventional stipulations regarding motherhood. Was convention, after all, so powerful?' (ibid.: 113). In our last meeting Tryfina meditated on the meaning of being a mother beyond the mothering tasks, into identity, beyond identity, into mythology:

I don't have that language ... down properly ... because sometimes ... when I talk about it I sound as if the grand motherhood ... myth is what I would like to feed into. And [at] other times I think I just sound ... like someone [who] doesn't know what she's talking about. It's like so elusive (RPM5).

Tryfina's meditation was a momentary reprieve from the constant mothering task and left some of us with a feeling of reverence for something greater than ourselves. Veronica, who throughout our conversations defended against calling herself mother (in favour of parent), suggested to Tryfina to stay away from mother as identity and myth, and to rather focus on mothering (as equal to parenting). Maybe because of the sheer overwhelm of what mothers as a collective are part of?

Well, maybe that's why it should remain in the realm of the mythological and you shouldn't ... I mean, there are many myths ... that inform our values and our lives, but we don't live inside of them. And motherhood should be one of them, we just ... have to live in the best way that we possibly can (Veronica, RPM5).

Veronica sometimes described the mother story as less complex than other RPs did. This dynamic played itself out in multiple ways in the group unconscious, leading to, it seems to me, some RPs silently withdrawing from that conversation. Tryfina was not silenced. She modelled what an assertive woman's voice can sound like, rather than retreating passively like many women do, or enacting male aggression in the face of different opinion:

I definitely know that ... when I held my first baby, I did feel a shift ... from a wonder to just sheer terror ... just this wonder that ... this is the ... full human being ... and the terror of being ... having to take care of ... this little person. Something definitely shifted. And I also feel that there's not enough acknowledgement ... of that [radical shift] ... it did change the way I looked at life, and also how I started living life, there was something that happened (Tryfina, RPM5).

In response, Veronica expressed her ambivalence – a vulnerability all of us around the table could identify with and appreciate. This was a moment of maternal connection beyond mothering:

You see, that's labour. It's the failure to value mothering, which is partly what I'm trying to say, is like being a mother is actually work. It's actually a job,

you know, you don't get paid for it, but it's a job. Or being a parent ... it's a job. The problem is not motherhood, the problem is this weird dichotomy, this weird disconnect between the mythologising of motherhood ... and the devaluing of motherly labour (Veronica, RPM5).

Psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1953) defines the mothering of a child as a live, prolonged, human relationship which alters the characters of both the female parent or permanent mother-substitute and the child. Bowlby suggests one primary, constant attachment figure. He believes that one of the differences between mother and father is the continuity in mothering that is not necessarily the case in fathering. Winnicott (1964: 17) says that 'fathers come into [parenting] ... by the fact that they can be good mothers for limited periods of time'. There is general consensus that infants need constant care for mental wellbeing. It is not often enough added that constant maternal care needs a well enough mother, at least for most of the time.

Han (2015) writes that an achievement society (which is the Western, capitalist context within which we, the RPs, largely live), is a society of self-exploitation. He says that the achievement-subject exploits itself until it burns out; developing auto-aggression, ultimately leading to self-destruction. Han does not mention mothers. I admit that the origin of pressure on mothers to perform (read achieve) on many fronts other than only mothering – if they are to call themselves free to any degree – is intrapsychic as well as external, societal. I do believe, though, that how much mental, physical and time capacity an average mother without extensive familial and social support has to play other roles, to be more than just a mother, depends greatly on the environment and relationships within which she lives. To what extent the mothering role excludes or accommodates other roles, I believe, is dependent on the mental load, the expectations of her as mother, and the familial and social support she has (more on the mental load and maternal support, or allomothering below). What is clear throughout our RPMs, is that the mother role is mostly seen, within our contexts, as the one that is supposed to take precedence over all the others, that takes its toll more

than most of the others, that needs more maintenance than many mothers are afforded:

I'm thinking about ... that doubt that seems to be brought in the voice of: Am I a good enough mother? ... Now I'm asking myself (whether) I think I'm a good enough lover? Do I think I'm a good enough sister? Do I? So I can go to all my roles. Because I'm trying to figure out if it is amplified in motherhood. And if it is amplified in motherhood, is it because there's some kind of time gush of cultural embeddedness or projection onto that role specifically? (Simone, RPM1).

My response to Simone's statement above, was:

I also absolutely have the feeling that mother is the most dominant, and the most prominent role. I thought that being a mother excludes most of the other roles, so I gave up many of the other roles when I had my first child. I was clinically depressed very early on, a few weeks after she was born. In retrospect I realised that there was a big part of me that was totally asleep, because I thought being a mother excludes most of the rest ... And I think for me, it had a lot to do with the impossibility of actually ... being a mother and having a job and being a lover and being a sister ... and doing all of them well enough for what the social norm is. And then ... when I realised that I am allowed to be some of those other roles also, I think I started becoming a better mother (RPM1).

Rich (2021/1976: 8) says that she did not realise, during her early mothering years, that the social expectation of middleclass women is to 'fill both the part of the Victorian Lady of Leisure, the Angel in the House, and also of the Victorian cook, scullery maid, laundress, governess, and nurse'. Rose (2018) discusses society's projections of the ultimate love and hate onto mothers, and states that unless we recognise how much and what we are asking mothers to perform in the world, and for the world, there will be no redemption of mothers or the world.

Jackie responds to the above conversation about social expectations and roles, and the impossibility of success, adding that:

I cannot expect my children to be adult. I must guide them through life. I must validate them ... I must validate their existence, but you must first try and figure out who they are so that you can validate them. I think that's also the tricky part (RPM1).

In her short history of how the image and expectations of women have morphed from the 1950's-1960's to now, Orgad (2019), says that for the first time, the 21st century debate more honestly confronts the structural barriers to women's success. The impossibility of a so-called successful mothering outcome is clear in Jackie's comment above. I believe that a direct outcome of this more honest public debate, amongst a myriad of other forms of feminist social campaigning during the past decades, is the trend that mothering and fathering could, to some extent, overlap and even morph into a common parenting project. What, exactly, is the difference between mothering, fathering, and parenting? As discussed above, we often pondered on this question, sometimes despondently, ultimately without consensus or final conclusion; almost always with the feeling that the bearer of the mental load is, by default, the mother. What follows is a short extract from a conversation between Mae and Veronica during our final RPM:

Mae (herself a feminist scholar): Feminist scholars have got a problem with motherhood. They say ... mothering can be done by anyone ... it's been happening [since] forever. Everyone has ... a parent, everyone on the planet has a parent.

Veronica: And everyone has been mothered, even by their father or their non-binary parent.

Mae: And that's the sad thing, that the load is on mothers (RPM5).

Next I explore ideas about what mothers *are supposed to be*, labour division in the household and typical gender roles in families, and to what extent the mental load and physical mothering/parenting tasks are shared between mother and father and other caregivers.

5. DIVISION OF LABOUR

5.1 What a Mother is Supposed to Be

As mentioned in the previous section, the popular discourse around (mainly middle class, White) mothering has changed significantly since the 1950's-1960's. At first, institutions created and endorsed media campaigning for a 1950's-1960's post-war Anglo-American high consumerist, happy housewife often with a prescription of 'mommy's little helper' (see the America Addiction Centers' blog for a history of 'Painkiller Addiction Among Suburban Housewives', 2023). This wife was followed by the 1980's-1990's supermom who effortlessly combined motherhood and career, a liberated woman, successful in a male-driven world without losing her femininity. Orgad (2019) lists the main ideas in the social construction of this supermom with her family and work as personal freedom, choice, individualism, and agency. From the 1990's onwards, feminist politics included the notion of 'choice feminism' (ibid.: 29). Choice feminism preached that the social, structural factors which have in the past been organised to hamper women, have largely been overcome. The implication of

this belief is that any differences between women's and men's lives can now be accounted for by personal choices made by individuals. The premise of choice feminism is to celebrate and validate the individual choices of individual women. However, we learn from the existentialists that with the freedom of choice always comes the burden of responsibility, or at least reasonable action (Sartre, 1986). It seems as if the choice feminist celebration of women's choice, therefore, carries a subliminal message that she is to be blamed for any inequalities that she may still experience as she has chosen the life she leads, and therefore needs to deal with it.

I did not come across much proof of choice feminism in our RP conversations. As also stated by Orgad (2019), in our conversations we moved beyond the fantasy of being the 1980's idea of supermoms (albeit in rational conversation and, at times, still with an emotional undertone of self-judgement and a sense of failure). We spoke from lived experience of the debunked myth. We are human mothers, unable to be the myth.

5.2 The Mental Load

Morgan, from his family practices approach (2011, 2020), explains the concepts of family (as conventional, normative model consisting of father, mother, and related children) and household (often containing non-family members). Morgan states that there has been an increasing recognition of diversity of family models and household arrangements during the last fifty years. Yet, family practices are still often seen as 'gender practices' or the enactment of gender roles (2020: 3). Most of us spoke, often with resentment, from the above-mentioned conventional, normative family model. Cecilia displayed the resentment that she feels in her work environment in the following statement:

I always get pissed off when there are men who say, oh, I can't make the meeting because I [have to] pick up my kid. And I feel like a woman would never say that, women would make the arrangement well (RPM2).

Another layer was added to our conversation by Jackie (who was at the time working in a harsh, male-dominated environment where she constantly had to prove that her mother status did not interfere with her competence in the workplace). Jackie noticed that when a man picks up his children:

His mothering, as the dad, becomes a thing. Is it something that you then go into and say, and own it and say, and express it and say I am a mother? Or is it something that you say I'm not going to tell anybody? Because I want to show that my motherhood identity is not standing in the way of my professional ability?' (RPM2).

Without exception, we all expressed resentment and made jokes about fathers who do seemingly normal mothering tasks, say it out loud, and get social acknowledgement for it. Veronica told of her brother who is a single father of three children:

People bend over backwards for him in a way they wouldn't for a woman who's a single mom. There's something that inspires sympathy. I mean, he's lost a wife, he's kind of a sympathetic figure, and people really try and save him (RPM2).

Jackie responded with: 'I hope he gets his mileage out of that', and we all burst out laughing (RPM2). Although Nadine is a lesbian mother who is raising her child with her wife, she admitted that they also often fall into traditional roles of mother-doer and mother-carer. She explained:

It's not the same [as in heterosexual households]. Both moms, but you also have different strengths as well and different abilities. I also land up taking on quite a lot of the mothering anyway, even [though] there is another

mother ... So, like I said in the story (WT2), more activities, more like cooking, caring, making sure everything's good ... but I can leave the other stuff ... you know, the other stuff about being tender. So, yes, it is different and it's also not ... I guess I do probably feel less pressure because there's another mother (RPM2).

As mentioned before, in our RP conversations we struggled through the concepts of mother, father, and parent. Mae believed that:

Mothering, [the] act of being a mother [is] usually and generally associated with women. It's not exclusive to women, anyone in a position of nurturing care can mother, but by and large, it is women. Men are the exception in that role, although they are [also equipped] to mother that way (RPM1).

Simone said:

That confusion between mother role and father role ... there was a lot of emotions and mirroring and difference becoming clear ... I'm trying to figure out okay, am I a parent and a mother? (RPM1).

And Tryfina's response was:

I was going to say that, because in my thinking about it there was no father ... because there's something about [the difference in] being a mother and being a parent. And it is really something that I'm struggling with (RPM1).

The designated primary caregiver, throughout the heterosexual RPs' stories, and amply supported by the literature is, with sparse examples of exceptions, the mother (Garbes, 2022; Greer, 1999; Hrdy, 2000; Lazarre, 1976; Knott, 2019; Neustatter, 1989; Orgad, 2019). One of the important questions asked by anthropologist-primatologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (2000), is why fathers did not evolve to be more attentive to their small children's needs, given the fact that they share an equal percentage of their children's genes. Hrdy mentions Herbert Spencer's theory of the physiological division of labour by sex (in other words, gender roles based on sexual differences between mother and father). In short, Spencer believed that men produce, and 'women merely reproduce' (Hrdy, 2000: 14-15). Mae spoke of men's productive labour as 'the work that they produce at their office', that their wives and households do not exist for them while they are at the office, and that they do not exist for themselves in the household while they are at the office (RPM1). The reproductive labour of mothers, Mae explained, comprises the productive labour in the office, 'plus while we're doing that kind of work, we're sending messages ... pick up our kids, etcetera' (ibid.). Mae described the reproductive labour of mothers as an amalgamation of multiple roles and tasks rather than the compartmentalisation of typically productive labour. Interrupted time is part of the mother's reproductive labour and per definition the nature of the mental load. In thinking narratively, Knott quotes psychoanalyst Lisa Baraitser explaining that the mother's personal narrative is 'punctured at the level of constant interruptions to thinking, reflecting, sleeping, moving and completing tasks' (Knott, 2019: 265). Mothers carry the mental load; they keep the system in mind while doing and delegating. From a sociological perspective, and thinking within the patriarchal system of motherhood, women's decision to not return to work after having their children is often determined by their husbands' inflexible work environments, amongst many other gender political reasons (Orgad, 2019). Husbands' demanding jobs allow many families to survive on a single income, and at the same time forces mothers to be free to manage the household and children. Ultimately, often, even in cases where the father plays an active role in the household, the mental load seems to be the mother's job. Below is a description of Jackie's mental load:

When I was writing the mothering story I consciously ... did not try and write about how I've also struggled with mothering as part of my relationship with my partner ... I had very bad COVID ... last year and a lot of people were just dying around me, so I was worried that should I die today [my partner] wouldn't know that next Wednesday the kid needs to go for a dentist appointment ... So, I've started a Google calendar where I've put in all the kids' activities and ... appointments ... Certain times of the year I am sometimes away for two days in a week [to work in a different city]. Then [my partner sends me a message] to ask me what time he must pick up the kids. This cannot be what mothering is. It cannot be a list of chores and the emotional load ... He asked me if I asked him to *please* pack the lunch boxes. But what must I pack? he asks. What does she like? And I'm thinking, how do you not know? ... Why don't you know these things? By most standards he's an involved father that's open-minded about things, and I've wondered why, while I was writing that story and leaving [my partner] out of [it], because it was about me as a mother and not me as a partner or mother of my husband (Jackie, RPM1).

Later in the same conversation Jackie reflected on WT1. She noted that many of our partners were absent in our mothering stories, 'as if mothering is something you do on your own' (RPM1). She mentioned that she noticed when one RP wrote about her partner sharing her responsibilities during the COVID-19 lockdown period, as if it needed special mention. Lazarre (1976) describes the mental load as her being the boss, but that it was half the responsibility she needed to be rid of. But not all of this is always only the fathers' fault. Feminist psychoanalyst Christiane Olivier (1989) blames the stories told by classical psychoanalysis for the distance so often created between

fathers and children. Olivier speaks about the stereotypical stories that abound in classical psychoanalysis wherein fathers are distanced from children, mothers always present (and of course not innocent in what goes wrong in their children's life stories), and that mothers in that way hold the power in child-rearing (ibid.). Maybe in being acknowledged as the boss in a non-threatened, non-patronising way, many women would carry a gentler load. But, as I quoted Rich earlier in this chapter, it is 'in the division of labour according to gender, [that] the makers and sayers of culture, the namers, have been the sons of the mothers' (2021/1976: lix). I believe that it is in the fact that mothers are told by fathers how to be doing the mothering, and then also not being supported sufficiently by them, where the oft-seen resentment lies. This belief is illustrated in this polyphonic compound character's story below, that I created from the transcript of RPM1, WT1, and my own life story in Chapter 3.

Who's in the Middle? (A compound character's story created from RPM1, WT1, and my story in Chapter 3)

I am the fourth born of five children, and the only girl child. I remember how I was frequently offended by others' assumption that I should be terribly spoilt because of being the only girl. My version was experiences of exclusion from the fun because I was the girl child – living in a patriarchal society and an urban jungle where girls are protected by boys, or left at home.

My mom gets a far-off look, a half-smile, and a cantabile in her tone when she tells the story of my birth. Dad blowing the final whistle while refereeing on the school rugby field as I announced my own arrival and gazed into the first light through the birth canal – after four gruelling labour days. No saving the mom with a needle up the spine or a few happy drugs in those days. (This part should have been told more in cabaletta style than the mentioned cantabile, if you ask me. But maybe don't ask me. Both my new-borns and I have, three decades and some medical advancements later, been saved from the four labour days with needles full of happy drugs).

Mom loves to tell that she did not believe in rearranging the world around her children (read sons. I wonder whether mom was decades ahead of the submissive co-mothers of the patriarchy, or just not bothered with the discomfort of self-sacrifice?). She believed that it's not a good thing to treat a child as if they are the centre of the globe. Mainly, she explains unconvincingly, because of the devastation that comes with the discovery of the truth: that they're not. That the world, save good family and a few friends, are not really interested in others' new children. So, whenever a new brother comes along, all you do is shift up a little bit. Like nothing in the family changes, you know, there's no special place made for the new child, all just shifting up and making a little bit of space. But with the arrival of the princess, they tried to rearrange the world. I, the reason for all the song and dance, don't know if that was such a good thing. I have struggled throughout my life around dinner tables and in meeting rooms where colleagues and acquaintances and, more recently, my adult children, too often show vague disinterest in my self-indulgent tales. And only after years of psychotherapy am I now able to claim some tendencies to self-indulge. But back to mom's story. She tells of my second brother, who was six at the time, bringing his bestie to the maternity ward to meet his new sister. After a brief encounter with the sleeping baby through the display window, brother and friend were found in deep conversation, sitting on the steps outside the ward. What they were talking about was who she, the few hours old baby sister, was going to marry. They, the protective men in her tale, needed to make sure that she was going to be okay. They had to marry her off well, so she'll be safely protected by a really good, and big, and strong husband, because she's a girl and she's vulnerable.

What an endearing story, thank you mother. And thank brother (who is still big and strong and still kisses me patronisingly on my 57-year-old forehead whenever he greets me). But there's a flaw in this story. That I was not the centre at all, that I was merely the object of male care. Something so fiercely wrong with us girls being pampered princesses yet having to be invincible maternal figures in the centre, carrying the whole world and all our children and dragging their lunch boxes and favourite teddies our own briefcases make-up bags etcetera behind us all in one go,

and at the same time the boys feel the need to protect us. That makes them strong, you know. But, how else are they going to get into the story, these boys?

And what about the continuation of my brother's tale into my story? He managed well. Of course I married the strong one. To survive life, to not be alone, to not be thrown out of the nest, to not face the world on my own, to not have to fill the purse, to not have to do this life thing without the protection of this strong man. But this forehead, these breasts, thighs will be 58 very soon. I should have thought of that during all these years of load-carrying. Should have slogged less. Worked out now and then. Should have groomed more.

Socially, mothers are held responsible for raising their children to become high-functioning adults. As mentioned before, 'everyone on the analytic couch talks about the mother' (Olivier, 1989: x), and that the consequences in terms of social punishment are great on the mother if her children do not grow into said high functioning adults. Mothers find themselves in double binds; not able to live the mythological perfection required of the role, not able to cope with day-to-day mothering as well as careers, and not having the luxury of failure. So, because of the impossibility of the mental load, mothers have, since the beginning of time, enrolled 'othermothers' (Knott, 2019: 203), or 'allomothers' (Hrdy, 2000: 121) to help them out. In the next section I explore, with reference to the data, the African proverb *It takes a village to raise a child*.

5.3 It Takes a Village to Raise a Child

The expectations from motherhood (as an institution) on women, especially when translated into mothering tasks, are impossible for one woman to meet on her own. Rich agrees with Bowlby and Winnicott that 'mothering a child implies a continuing presence' (2021/1976: 12), but, she argues, women throughout history have helped to birth and raise each other's children. Hrdy (2000) also believes in the communality of the project; *allomothering* and *cooperative breeding* as part of mothering. Hrdy's definition of allomothers include the mother's mate and individuals other than the child's parents. In human beings, Hrdy says, allomothers are often older, post-reproductive relatives like grandmothers and aunts (ibid.). Knott's definition of

allomothers include those mothers who teach us how to be mothers and refers to the transmission of knowledge over generations (2019). In this way Knott moves away from the pop-analytic idea that the mother is always at fault and the ultimate creator of, and responsible one for human mental wellbeing. The modern, Western story varies dramatically from that of many African and Latin-American countries (including South Africa, where we RPs raise/d our children). As seen above, the expectation of Western mothers is to carry the load and to do it well. I, and some of the other RPs, grew up and raised our children in this Western, mostly urban, context. However, a large part of South African (especially rural) children are raised by the village. Garbes mentions her mother, babysitter, and friends – or ‘pod co-parents’ – as extensions of herself as mother (2022: 9). Lazarre adds the day-care and other mothers (1976), and May Thato adds that in post-colonial (South) Africa, ‘we have grannies, aunties, nannies, and domestic workers as co-mothers’ (RPM1). Garbes believes that ‘raising children is not a private hobby, not an individual duty’ (ibid.: 10). She sees raising children as a social responsibility, one that requires ‘robust community support’ (ibid.).

I think about the village and its support structure as a complex system (see Chapter 2); an organism of interconnectedness without a central reference/starting point; a non-linear organism that grows from everywhere, and in all directions (Theise, 2023). During the RPMs we spoke about child-rearing knowledge and practices transferred, often implicitly, from older generations, as well as how we were life-long learners taught by our children and many others. After reading some of the RPs first WTs, Jackie was surprised that she did not write about her mother in her own mother story, as our mothering practices and knowledge cannot be seen outside the intricate system of transference:

I mean, this [writing task] was about you as a mother ... obviously. When you're in a therapy situation you write about your own mother because that influences your own mothering, and I was wondering why I did not write about my mother's influence on [my] mothering. Why that was not something that came up [in my own story] (RPM1).

May Thato grew up in a rural village. She described her childhood memories as an integral part of how she learned about mothering. She spoke about the difference between her village upbringing and the shortfalls of raising children in the city, without the village support of her childhood:

I thought mothering was going to be a breeze, because they made it look like it's a breeze. But the reality is that they had lots of help in our community. My granny ... retired early but she was busy. She really made a home ... we minced our own meat, [made our] own sausages, [made our] own butter ... cheese, your own clothes. There is always work to be done. So, they were busy, and we were all busy, we all had things to do. But then there were other children, and you could go out and play in the veld. You didn't need an adult to ... play Ludo or snakes and ladders, there were other [children] that you could play with. So ... it's quite different because when you are caught in a nuclear family situation, that's all you have (RPM1).

The village model seems more effective than that of the overwhelmed alone mother or isolated nuclear family. An entire new philosophy and schooling system was developed in the REA to create a post-war village culture to support mothers (see Chapter 2), and the village has been practiced widely elsewhere since before recorded history. Yet, we felt ambivalent about needing- and asking for help. Simone explained:

I'm actually not thinking about mothering, I'm thinking about the story of the independent mother. So much from my cultural events linking to the nuclear family is that I will do it myself. Yes, we support each other, but actually, I'm successful if I can do it, I can achieve things [on my own]. I can have a career, I can be a mother, I can do this. That's this elusive success. So, we

don't have community anymore. No, not in the true sense. We have community but it's different. It's not that old style community where there are six mothers on tap and 30 children. So, I'm raising a child single. And what do you do? You put down all your other roles because this child is welcome. And you're the one. You're the mother (RPM1).

May Thato reminded Simone that in South Africa, Western mothers who do not raise their children in villages or communities often have (mostly Black) domestic workers as allomothers. This was a difficult (if unintentional) moment of racial shame in the conversation, as May Thato is a Black, middleclass, urban mother reminding a White, middleclass, urban mother that she is not actually raising her child 'as single' as she claims to be doing. May Thato continued to talk about her experience of hiring a domestic worker with the blatant agenda of using her as childminder too. Even then her ambivalence at the end of this excerpt, that her domestic worker is maybe a better allomother than her husband, is clear. Being measured against the patriarchal motherhood agenda makes it almost impossible to surrender to help without self-/social judgement and a sense of failure:

I know that when I chose a domestic worker, there were certain qualities [I was looking for] somehow unconsciously. I knew that ... there was an anxiety that I have to hire someone to look after my children, who can give them what I can't give them ... You can say I am the mother, that's true, but the reality also is that we've got very good domestic workers who have looked after us, maybe after you, I don't know. And they've looked after the grandchildren, the second generation of children. In some other respects I remember there was a time when I was not working full time. And my youngest son was then in grade seven ... and I started working [full time]

again that week and I came home, and my helper said, Mme May Thato, I've noticed, since you started working [your son] can't find his trousers in the morning. He never had a problem, now when he goes to school it's like he can't find his. So, you have to think and think and I said, I wonder, maybe it is because I started working. You know, she had that kind of curiosity to ask what's happening ... It was like she was also co-parenting in a way, although my husband is very good, I think, with children (RPM1).

A lot has been written, especially by Black feminists, about nannies and the idea that came about from the 1970's onwards, that (mostly White, middleclass) mothers can free themselves from mothering by hiring a maid to do the housework and mind the children. Jackie commented on the irony of hiring a woman to mind house and child, and in this way, finding being a mother more bearable (RPM1). This arrangement is nowadays the most common allomothering model in middleclass, urban South Africa, and although the employers are no longer only White mothers, the nannies are almost exclusively still Black women, and often mothers themselves. Mae, an urban, Western, White mother, reflected on her nuclear family that is 'much too nuclear nowadays, that there's not enough support, and how other cultures might [still] be much more communal' (RPM3). Mae spoke about the community that is no longer the rural village:

But what I have is Instagram and Facebook and WhatsApp. So that ... becomes my community ... And that's, for me, a very informative community, but it's also a very judgemental and comparative community. And then it also makes me wonder if I'm just romanticising ... what [it is] like to be in your village and your mother-in-law comes from miles away to stay with you for four months, someone that you hardly know, and tells you how to breastfeed your baby. Like, that's going to be pretty shit (RPM3).

In pondering on Mae's digital community, I have to think about the curated, unrealistic role models, impossible for most mothers to attain. So, as mentioned earlier, many mothers seek the help of others in the form of allomothers. But, and in the next section I address this, that even though they have help, they still stay the primary mothers, and presumed by society to be higher up on the hierarchy than their helpers and other non-mothers.

6. HIERARCHY OF MOTHERHOOD

In an introduction to Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Eula Biss writes that all women's lives are defined by motherhood, whether or not they have their own children (2021/1976: xiv). Letherby, who has done extensive research on involuntary childless/infertile women and is herself an (historically self-defined) involuntary childless woman, believes that 'women without children still represent the "other" in societies that value children and motherhood' (1999: 359), and that childless women are often seen as 'desperate or selfish' (2002: 7). Letherby believes that, by paying little attention to non-motherhood and its complexities and ambivalences, feminism is contributing to *pronatalism* – the upholding of the importance of motherhood as a category in patriarchy. In this way the stereotype of non-mother as 'unfulfilled and desperate' woman will remain (ibid.: 360). Letherby (2017) speaks about a hierarchy of motherhood in which biological mothers, in relation to social mothers, are seen to be higher up because biological motherhood is socially seemingly more real and natural. Yet, all women, with or without children, are expected to be caring, nurturing, and to display many more characteristics associated with mothering. (Also see DiLapi, 1989, who coined the 'hierarchy of motherhood').

Rich writes an extensive section on how language creates, and gives clues about, 'the powerful secrets of the culture' (2021/1976: 256. See pp. 256-261 for the complete argument). She speaks of the absence, in the English language, of a self-defining word for a woman without children or men. She mentions terms like 'unchilded', 'childless', 'child-free', and that all these terms indicate a lack of (without child), rather than 'what she is about in and of herself' (ibid.: 256-257). Our (RPs) conversations did not revolve around the absence of children. We are all mothers, albeit biologically or

socially, and we did not often speak about *not* being that, or even about women without children. Jackie briefly reflected: 'I don't know my adult self as anything else. I'm not anything else, but I don't know what I would have been if I was not a mother. So, I would have been a non-mother' (RPM1). Letherby (2002), and Letherby and Williams (1999) note that, socially, we still presume that the central characteristic of femininity is having a child, and that women are seen as abnormal or unfeminine without this desire. They believe that society 'still takes for granted that "woman" equals "mother" equals "wife" equals "adult", and this presumption still remains a part of medical, political, and public discourse' (ibid.: 721), and that 'biological ... motherhood goes alongside dominant discourses of "proper womanhood"' (Letherby, 2002: 17). But Letherby remembers Foucault in reminding us that discourses do change, and she calls on feminism to 'begin with real, concrete people and their actual lives if it is to do more than reaffirm the dominant ideologies about women and their place in the world' (ibid.).

Rich (2021/1976) believes, as does Letherby (2017), that a feminist focus on mothers/non-mothers serves the institutions of motherhood and heterosexuality and negates the complexities of non-motherhood (Letherby & Williams, 1999) at the expense of sisterhood. The dearth of material from our RPMs is a confirmation of this focus on, and maybe even our preoccupation with our status as women with children. It is only in a collective sisterhood that all women, equally, can contribute towards transformative change.

7. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, drawing on my auto/biographical data, I attempted definitions of motherhood (as patriarchal institution), the mothering role (mother as a verb), and what it means to be named and called mother (as title). I discussed the traditionally gendered division of labour and the idea of the mental load as part of the woman's mothering role. Because it is impossible to be the type of mother expected by society, mothers often recruit allomothers to help. I discussed allomothering – raising children in social structures rather than alone. I ended the chapter with a discussion on a social

hierarchy of motherhood within which biological mothers, social mothers, non-mothers, and others are not seen equally.

In Chapter 6 I share thoughts on four major themes that I deducted from the data, namely maternal ambivalence, political and sacral mythmaking in the mother story, the choice to be a mother/other, and the idea that all roles compete for time, effort, and money. I conclude Chapter 6 with a discussion on the glaring absence of sex in the data.

CHAPTER 6: MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE

1. INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 5 I offered possible definitions of motherhood (as patriarchal institution), the mothering role (mother as a verb), and what it means to be named and called mother (as title). I continued with discussions on the traditionally gendered division of labour and the mental load as part of the mother's role. I discussed allomothering and what is meant with the African proverb, *It takes a village to raise a child*. I completed Chapter 5 with a discussion on a social hierarchy of motherhood within which biological mothers, social mothers, non-mothers, and others are not seen equally.

In Chapter 6 I share thoughts on four major themes that I deduced from the data, namely maternal ambivalence, political and sacral mythmaking in the mother story, to be a mother/other, and the idea that all the roles a mother plays compete for time, effort, and money. I conclude Chapter 6 with a discussion on the glaring absence of sex in the data.

2. FIRST THOUGHTS ON MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE

2.1 What do You Mean, Maternal Ambivalence?

I begin with an excerpt from Rich's original (1976) foreword to, *Of Woman Born* (2021/1976) that I often refer to in my thesis. Rich as feminist poet and mother, knows what mothers talk about when they talk about maternal ambivalence:

I could not begin to write a book on motherhood until I began to feel strong enough, and unambivalent enough in my love for my children, so that I could dare to return to a ground which seemed to me the most painful, incomprehensible, and ambiguous I had ever travelled, a ground hedged by taboos, mined with false-namings.

I did not understand this when I started to write the book. I only knew that I had lived through something which was considered central to the lives of women, fulfilling even in its sorrows, a key to the meaning of life; and that I could remember little except anxiety, physical weariness, anger, self-blame, boredom, and division within myself: a division made more acute by the moments of passionate love, delight in my children's spirited bodies and minds, amazement at how they went on loving me in spite of my failures to love them wholly and selflessly (ibid., 1976: lxiv-lxv).

I understand ambivalence as the simultaneous co-existence of more than one emotion towards and/or opinion of a specific person or issue. These emotions and/or opinions are opposite, rival, antagonistic, frictional. The words that I use to explain my understanding of the term are an indication of its intensity. Add the word 'maternal' before ambivalence, and you name an intensity most mothers will agree has no equivalent, and often stretches beyond language. I believe maternal ambivalence is largely born out of the mismatch between what mothers want, and what they believe society prescribes they should want. Betty Friedan (1963) writes:

[There is] a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we [are] trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique. I wondered if other women felt this schizophrenic split, and what it meant (ibid.: 9).

Friedan's interrogation grew into a major study of the origins and effects of this disconnect, and resulted in her book that is today seen as an important precursor to second wave feminism in the USA. Was May Thato commenting on Friedan's 'image to which we were trying to conform' when she reflected on WT1(ibid.)?

What am I doing [in raising my children]? ... It occurred to me that it's almost as if there is a ... standard of motherhood that you've got to attain. And I said, okay, so, uhm, who sets that standard? It's so elusive ... And shoot, shoot, shoot, who sets up that standard? (RPM1).

Lazarre (1976) has the guts in her piercingly honest book on her own motherhood experiences to speak the sometimes-unutterable experience of maternal ambivalence. Through her, Rich's (2021/1976), and other gutsy mothers' uncensored writings, we learn that it is possible – and normal – to sometimes hate one's loved child. It is by making public the secret ambivalence and not-so-secret judgement and punishment, that our universal experience of maternal ambivalence is normalised. Lazarre (1976) writes:

'Isn't being a mother the most wonderful thing you have even done?' the woman asked me that morning on the phone. 'Not really', I answered, holding back the tears. 'Actually, it is quite miserable and exhausting', and I put my hand over my mouth so I would stop before it was too late. 'Oh, don't say that', she said maturely. So, I didn't. And I stopped going to the group. I was becoming convinced that I was the only mother in the world who had such hateful feelings for the child I loved so intensely, who wished over and over that it had never happened, who, finally, could understand those women I had met when working for the Welfare Department who had burnt their babies' arms, beat their faces, killed them. But I would never breathe a word of such vicious identification, I decided. I would hide my real feelings in order to avoid the terrible looks which say, I am not like you nor have I ever been (ibid.: 57).

We did not often allow ourselves during the RPMs to express the dark sides of our ambivalences, but whenever anyone dared, she was always met with appreciation and identification. Here is an example where Jackie spoke about her difficult holiday with her children:

I was crying half of the holiday. And I actually took anti-anxiety medicine before I killed my children. But, but it actually turned out very well. [He] responded very well to therapy and the talking and so on. But ... you know, there's often that thing of, I want to control you because your *being* annoys me. Yes, it sounds very terrible ... I know sometimes when they fight, and they fight so harsh about something, really, and I just think you annoy me now and I just don't have the energy to ... either try and solve this problem or to fucking sit through it. And I think that's where some of the hard hardness of motherhood comes in for me. I actually would right now like to ship you off. Because, I said at the end of the holidays to my husband, I want to send them for a weekend to my mother, and then just the two of us go away, because, for a weekend, I just don't want them. I just don't want [them] (RPM2).

Veronica reassured her by responding, 'yes, that sounds really fine' (RPM2).

At another time during the same meeting, Jackie reflected on WT1, and that she did not include any niceties about her children. Did she, in that moment, need to convince herself, us, and society, that she was not only a bad mother, and that it was acceptable to complain about her children only if she could retract those statements afterwards?

I was wondering, so I didn't edit [my writing task before submitting it] ... If I would have edited the piece ... I would have probably put in the things that I also like about mothering. What do I like, so how I see myself as a mother ... So, if I would have edited the piece I would have edited a lot of the negativity out, also because there's this ... expectation maybe or this thing of, you think ... do we do this to ourselves? I should not. Because I look at myself; on the outside I'm actually doing okay, you know, I've got a full-time job, I've got three kids, the teachers never have something bad to say. So, I must be doing something right. They are well functioning, you know, at the soccer club they get glowing reviews of them as persons, not soccer players, persons, you know. And then I was thinking, if I edited it out ... would I at some stage show ... I'm actually fucking rocking this. And that's for me the ambivalence (Jackie, RPM2).

I wondered out loud about Jackie's permission to speak freely and to submit unedited writing tasks, and her immediate need afterwards to judge herself and to make reparations:

You write about it ... and you speak about it often, the idea that you want to ship your kids off for a while, and then immediately the harsh judgment ... You feel so bad for wanting to ship them off in the first writing task. Why are we not allowed to say we sometimes do not want our kids around? (Esther, *ibid.*).

Nadine identifies with what Jackie is saying, and judges herself in response, speaking about what she thinks society must be thinking of her:

You must all think I'm so terrible. Yes. Just enjoying that moment that you're telling this (referring to Jackie's anecdote above). I mean, I know that feeling so well. Yes. It's wonderful. There's no two ways about it, it's wonderful, and it's perfectly fine (Nadine, *ibid.*).

My response:

Thank you for that, and [that] you say it. But my, my fantasy is that it's socially unacceptable to say it. I don't know if it's just allowed around this table to say it, and whether it is okay to say it in other conversations as well.

I don't know (Esther, *ibid.*).

Raphael-Leff (2009, 2010b) writes about the conundrum that classical psychoanalysis created for mothers by neglecting their maternal subjectivity, and pathologising maternal ambivalence – leading to the demonisation of mothers (also see Baraitser & Noack, 2007). She explains that in classical psychoanalysis the biological mother is privileged as breastfeeding carer, 'the object of the baby's desire' (Raphael-Leff, 2010a: 545), and that all other carers, including father and family, are seen as secondary. Taken a step further, in his attachment theory Bowlby assumes permanent maternal care, 'or permanent mother-substitute for the infant – one person who steadily "mothers" him' (*sic.*) (1953: 13). Bowlby sets forth that the absence of a permanent one-person carer is a major cause of mental disorder and behavioural problems in the child's later life. Baraitser and Noack highlight that classical psychoanalytic writing creates the idea that 'a highly idealised mother, one who faces the onslaught of the child's demands with a benign, almost serene composure, and always makes it through to the other side' is the only mother who can produce a resilient child (2007: 178). This idealisation, they say, 'also produces denigration and leads to the familiar cycle of mother-blaming evident in the wider culture' (*ibid.*). This theory seems to rule out shared care and finds the mother in a double bind. In Chapter

5 I discussed the impossibility of raising children alone and therefore the importance of shared care, as well as the hierarchy of motherhood and that biological mothers are often thought of as superior to all other mothers and others (DiLapi, 1989; Letherby, 2017). Raphael-Leff (2010b) believes that this idea is a classical psychoanalytic set-up. Baraitser and Noack write that motherhood brings a unique intersectional point between psychoanalytic ideas about how to provide circumstances that can facilitate the healthy development of resilient children, and mother-subjects' 'struggle to survive the vicissitudes of motherhood itself' (2007: 171). Even though the mother is privileged as carer, the hierarchy does not necessarily serve her interests. I am also realising that classical psychoanalytic theory, that often relates to very early motherhood and infancy, is internalised as a long-term ideal by many mothers. This partly explains why mothers of older children often judge themselves as not good enough when they start spending more time, effort, and money on their other roles (more below on ambivalences in different roles). But I recall the ambivalence and self-judgement I felt during the time when my daughter was on my breast, and I had to leave her with her father or allomothers for moments at a time. Herewith a quote from my own mother story:

The impossibility of letting her go from my breast became an all-consuming obsession that no father, no mentally well human being, would fathom ... Partly due to my major depressive episode after the birth of my daughter, I overdid so-called *attachment parenting*. I am grateful that I was one of those mothers (or maybe patients) who clung to her child rather than the opposite (Esther, Chapter 3).

I wonder whether my ambivalence and self-judgement would have been softer had I not known Bowlby's attachment theory. Below is another example from RPM1, where I shared theoretical knowledge about what I believe a mother should be like, and Mae agreeing with me that it is a struggle to know what that looks like in the real life of a mother-subject. The difficulty is to know which parts of ourselves we are allowed to

make known to our children and others, and what the impact would be if we made mistakes. Here I try to make sense of it:

What I do believe, and I know it comes from theory, is that ... I have to ... model to my kids that sometimes things are difficult. And it's okay to find it difficult. It's okay to be sad or ... to freak out, to be scared, but ... I believe that you, my child, can survive that, and so I create a containing space for my child, so they can start believing they can overcome difficult things ... How far can I decompose in front of the kids? ... Because I've got this belief that the kids need to see ... there are real feelings and some of them are difficult feelings. But I can't fall apart because then the world is going to become scary for them ... That's what I believe because that's what the early child analysts told us. As part of the construction, the idea that part of my ideal picture of being a good enough mother is supposed to be this container (referring to psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's idea that the mother should be the child's container, hold their unbearably intense emotions, and help the child not to disintegrate. Bion, 1962) (Esther, RPM1).

But that's what comes up for me ... this thing of scaffold mother identity, that whole good enough [mother] and doing the right thing ... Isn't it that when you become a mother you take on the identity of role model? This is your biggest performance, right? ... I think about all these different identities that I have, and I struggle with the mother one. But of all those other identities that I call myself, they all allow me more or less, much more than less, to be myself. So, I can be here, and I can be honest, and can be who I am and I don't have to impress anyone, or I can choose not to. When it comes to

being a mother, I have to, I have to, lots of have to's. Can I cry in front of [my children]? Can I scare them? Can I disappoint them? Can I swear? Can I say I don't like something, you know, and all the time, I know that the biggest learning for them will be from when I am just, when I'm not teaching them something, how I am every day ... So, for me it's huge, that responsibility now of being this role model that's teaching them all these things and hoping that they're going to be these good people. And, and I feel in that there's a lot of myself that I must hide away, I can't be scared if they're scared (Mae, *ibid.*).

Hrdy acknowledges Bowlby's ideas as a significant contribution made by 'evolutionary-minded psychologists to human well-being', but that it also causes 'irreconcilable dilemmas for mothers who want to raise emotionally healthy, self-confident children, but who also want lives or careers of their own' (2000: xi). Raphael-Leff (2010b) states that Freud's idealisation of the early mother-infant bond does not provide for maternal negative or even ambivalent feelings. Even though feminism and contemporary psychoanalysis question the *Madonna-Whore* myth, mothers' negative and ambivalent feelings are still under-explored in the academy (*ibid.*). I believe that this lack keeps the classical psychoanalytic mother-as-*Madonna*, Friedan's feminine mystique (1963), and the self- and social judgement and punishment of mothers intact. This lack, I believe, is the motivation for my study. An even greater dearth, that I address in a very limited way in my study (because of the limited data on it), is non-mother ambivalence. Society's message to ambivalent non-mothers is often that if you are ambivalent, you cannot be serious about wanting a child, so, it is your own fault. It is in the subjectivation of mothers and non-mothers, in allowing them to tell and write their own experiential stories, that the myths are debunked, and that mothers as well as non-mothers become nuanced, normal, human women, one story at a time (Rich, 2021/1976).

2.2 Four Types of Us

Raphael-Leff distinguishes between four basic mother orientations (Facilitator, Regulator, Reciprocator, and Conflicted), explaining that unconscious paradigms inform the psychosocial structuring of mothers (1986, 2009, 2010b). I adapted and renamed her four orientations into four mother-types to help describe the *Madonna-Whore* myth that prevails throughout my data. The four mother-types I am using in my study are the *Madonna*, the *Whore*, the *Anguished Ambivalent Mother*, and the *Integrated Ambivalent Mother*. I chose the names of *Madonna* and *Whore* as the two binary mother-(op)positions because of their use in our RPM conversations as well as their reputations in folklore and presentation in general literature. It became clear early in our conversations on maternal ambivalence, that ambivalent mothers are not a homogenous group. I therefore divide them into two sub-groups, namely *Anguished Ambivalent Mothers*, and *Integrated Ambivalent Mothers*. Mothers are always nuanced subject-humans, and it would be a disservice to label any mother as only one of these types. I use these types for clarity and brevity of my argument, but always assume that I am talking about nuanced subject-humans rather than reduced types.

Like Raphael-Leff's (2010b) Facilitator, the *Madonna* of my study sees mother-child as the primary relational unit, and often excludes her partner from this dyad. She believes that mothering is her calling, and that she therefore has limited capacity to identify with other roles. Because she overidentifies with her child, she easily suspends her own subjectivity. It is common for *Madonnas* to experience identity crises when their children individuate and separate from them. Classical psychoanalysis glorifies mothers into the *Madonna* type (Raphael-Leff, 2010b). *Madonnas* mostly suppress negative feelings and ambivalences towards their children, and are therefore often overcome with anxiety and guilt when negative feelings, ambivalences, and human error creep in.

I call my study's second mother-type, who coincides with Raphael-Leff's (2010b) Regulator, the *Whore*. The *Whore* believes the sexual couple to be the primary relational unit and she feels exploited by her fetus/baby for using her body and invading her and her lover's space. The *Whore* often uses strict sleeping and feeding

routines to make it possible for allomothers to take care of her child from a very young age. She often goes back to work and other roles that exclude her child very soon after delivery, partly to escape the undervalued housework role that she easily falls into. *Whores* often feel underappreciated by their children and partners. They do not enjoy, or sometimes do not have sex with their partners even though they believe that sex is part of their marital duty. They envy other mothers who seem to be more intact, and they talk to their girlfriends about their emotional overwhelm and burnt-out. *Whores* often find it difficult to negotiate themselves out of typically gendered household roles.

Raphael-Leff's (2010b) fourth mother orientation is the Conflicted. She wrestles with herself 'between maintaining an ideal of maternal perfection and rebellion against it', between idealising and resenting her child (ibid.: 10). She envies her baby for being cared for in the light of her own unresolved past resentments. The Conflicted is unable to accept that ambivalence between love and hate is a healthy part of the mothering experience. The third mother-type in my study overlaps with Raphael-Leff's Conflicted, and I call her the *Anguished Ambivalent Mother*. My study's *Anguished Ambivalent Mother* oscillates between *Madonna* and *Whore*, and completely represses the one while completely being the other, often experiencing debilitating guilt and shame for it, but never integrates both into her sense of self. There is a 'deep-seated, "almost universal" social split between mother as "*Madonna*" and "*Whore*", denigrating maternal sexuality as perverse' (Weldon cited by Raphael-Leff, 2010b: 12) (more on maternal sexuality later in this chapter).

Raphael-Leff's (2010b) third orientation, the Reciprocator, does not have one primary relational unit, but moves between a set of relationships within the family. The Reciprocator coincides with my fourth mother-type, and I call her the *Integrated Ambivalent Mother*. She continuously integrates her internal *Madonna* and *Whore* positions and accepts her ambivalences as part of her mothering experience without pathological self-judgement. The *Integrated Ambivalent Mother* makes constant emotional effort and has empathy for her partner, her child, and others. She sees other family members and their needs as separate from her and her own needs. She

considers potential conflicting needs of different family members, and she can negotiate boundaries and priorities within the family. She allows time, effort, and money for her own development and fulfilment outside of her roles as mother and spouse. The *Integrated Ambivalent Mother* is the mother-type that I strive to work towards with the mother-patients in my psychotherapy practice, that I strive to become more of in myself.

2.3 Love and Hate

A mother can, and will, love and hate her children; not only an *Anguished Ambivalent Mother*, but also an *Integrated Ambivalent Mother*-subject. To acknowledge this part is to help mothers back into sanity. Without the idealisation of *Madonnas* and the denigration of *Whores*, more mothers will start seeing themselves as *Integrated Ambivalent Mothers*. Baraitser and Noack believe that maternal resilience is an imperative part of maternal subjectivity, and that 'maternal resilience may usefully describe the aspect of ambivalence that entails bearing and accepting ourselves as mothers as well as our ambivalent feelings about our children' (2007: 171). But this 'bearing and accepting ourselves' at times feels like theory rather than subjective possibility (ibid.). Even within the safety of our RP conversation (although it was in RPM1, so maybe not that safe yet), Jackie struggled to express her negative feelings towards her children:

Just now what I struggle with at home ... [is] the kids. They are difficult. So, part of things that's difficult for me at the moment is actually, it sounds very bad, it's not the case constantly, but there are times to be with the kids, but *they are* the difficulty ... But I cannot tell them, it's because you make my life difficult ... When they do that, I have to ask myself, why am I not coping with them being little shitheads? ... And that, for me, is a big struggle ... Maybe we do read too much. Because when I do that, then my oldest makes me feel guilty. And then he comes, and he says I would like to make you

feel better. And then I'd be upset because I don't want to raise a child who's co-dependent (Jackie, RPM1).

Simone identified with Jackie's ambivalence and expressed herself strongly against Jackie's difficult children. She reacted against the backdrop of a longer conversation about the inevitable failure of mothers, and that we all do damage to our children, no matter how hard we try not to: 'Then they better fucking behave. I think you're screwed. You're screwed and you're going to fuck them up. Okay, so, choose which one, if you want to make a good enough choice' (Simone, *ibid.*). Jackie continued:

Yes, sometimes it's hard, and you don't talk about it being hard. You, you can say it's a terrible day, but you don't go into the detail of why it is. It's just [that] the kids are terrible. It's not what they do to me, them being noisy, or [that] they fight a lot these days. It's, it's very hard to put it [into words]. [My partner] blames the kids. And I wonder why I get so upset when they fight ... And then right after that I read about a colleague of mine whose three-year-old has leukaemia that's almost untreatable. And then I feel really, really guilty about being annoyed with my kids ... There's this need to be able to be honest about these things ... but how really difficult it is. Because I have three healthy, beautiful, clever kids (Jackie, *ibid.*).

I set up the RPMs for my study partly to create a space for a few mothers to talk about the ambivalences, and to normalise these ambivalences as part of the mother's experience (more on the incidental therapeutic value of RPMs in Chapter 8). I hoped that the RPMs would help us to acknowledge our growing into motherhood also as a revisiting of our own stories of being mothered, integrating our ambivalences rather than judging ourselves and/or projecting difficult material onto others. What is clear from the above quote is the general difficulty for mothers to give themselves

permission to express their ambivalences without self and/or social judgement and the anticipation of punishment. Rose (2018) speaks about the 'virtue and terror' in all humans, and therefore also in mothers. She explains, psychoanalytically, that we project our own terror onto others if we cannot see it in ourselves. When mothering is described only as healthy, loving, devotional, it is important to know that 'a complex range of emotions are suppressed/silenced', or projected onto others (ibid: 86). I wonder whether Jackie's partner was more able to see the terror in their children than in her in an unconscious attempt to ban the possibility of an *Anguished Ambivalent Mother* type in favour of the *Madonna* he needs to believe she is. Being able to observe without judgement seems impossible in moments of emotional overwhelm. (A neuropsychological discussion on hormonal working and inability to think rationally in moments of extreme emotional overwhelm lies beyond the scope of this study. Van der Kolk, 2015, is a useful source for further reading on this topic). Rose (2018) quotes Rich (2021/1976) in saying 'I do not see the mother with her child as more morally credible or morally capable than any other woman ... Why should mothers, more than anybody else, be good?' (Rose, 2018: 81). Rose speaks about the moment of demythification of mothers, when they become human (subjects), when they are allowed to hold both virtue and terror (in other words, love and hate). But this is not what society allows mothers to be. 'The mothers of the Western world are at once punished for being mothers [*Whore*] and instructed to love without reserve [*Madonna*]' (ibid.: 97). (See the *Madonna-Whore* myth discussion below).

2.4 Mother, Get to Know Your Self

As seen above in the interaction between Simone and Jackie, because the social and self-punishment is so difficult to tolerate, the terror is often denied by the mother to others, and even by the mother to herself. Rose suggests that in the accounts of motherhood that she explores in *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*, often 'the mother's right to know her own mind' is missing or being pushed aside (2018: 110). Therefore, the easy social expectation that mothers should apply self-mastery, be rational, and get over their histories of being mothered as well as their mothering their own children. (This refers to the stereotype in classical psychoanalysis of woman as hysterical, and something I often encounter in my own clinical practice with mothers,

nowadays partly understood under the over-used term gaslighting). ‘You are born into the slipstream of your mother’s unconscious ... No more so than in a culture that commands a mother to be all for her child’ (Rose, 2018: 109-110). For a mother to know what it means to be born into the slipstream of her mother’s unconscious, to know how she continues to play out this familial story (the term transgenerational trauma is in vogue at present, how do we break the traumas of our ancestors?). But Beauvoir (1953) is critical of psychoanalysis. Her idea of woman’s destiny is based on choice and freedom. This idea opposes the psychoanalytic belief that ‘human beings are unconsciously driven and torn between conflicting desires’ (Beauvoir cited by Rose, 2018: 135). Yet, she acknowledges that any mother partly relives her own story in having an own child. Olivier believes that classical psychoanalysis reveals what men expect women to be, and she is unsure whether it gives ‘any kind of account of what women actually are’ (1989: 3). Is classical psychoanalysis playing into the *Madonna-Whore* myth? Olivier (1989) quotes Luce Irigaray in saying, ‘[u]p to this point, the main concepts of psychoanalysis, its theory, will have taken no account of women’s desire’ (ibid.). Germaine Greer mourns this with her famous statement that ‘Freud is the father of psychoanalysis. It has no mother. He is not its only begetter, and subsequent structures have challenged as well as reinforced his systems’ (1991: 110). And ‘Oedipus is thought of as the universal model of man, maybe it’s time Jocasta was thought of as the eternal myth of woman-and-mother’ (Olivier, 1989: 2).

Mothers, all women, have a mammoth task of getting to know themselves; in their behavioural patterns with their children, partners, and family systems, and against their ancestral stories. If a woman chooses to believe the conventions of classical, patriarchal psychoanalysis, her self-discovery journey will be fraught with set-ups for further failure. Therefore, the importance of Winnicott’s 1949 anti-conventional paper, *Hate in the Counter-Transference*. He states that only a psychoanalyst (as replacement for mother) who is in touch with their own fear and hatred of the patient (as replacement for their child) will be useful to the patient in responding to the patient’s needs instead of their own. Only if a mother is allowed, by her own super-ego as well as by society, to make contact with her own hate, will she be able to meet her child’s without devastation. Rose says:

We can opt for hatred of hatred ... Or instead, we can take as a model for our social as well as psychological well-being the complex, often painful reality of motherhood ... What qualifies mothers for this task is that they are not in flight from the anguish of what it means to be human. Not, it should also be stated, that mothers are the only ones who ever have access to such insight (2018: 117).

3. MYTHMAKING IN THE MOTHER STORY

I mentioned in Chapter 5 a conversation in RPM5 when Tryfina found momentary refuge from the constant mothering task in a meditation on 'the grand motherhood myth', and Veronica's resistance to the mythological sphere. This section addresses political and sacral myths – a way in which I understand the disconnect between Tryfina and Veronica's different interpretations of mythology.

3.1 Political Myth

In his article on mythmaking as a feminist strategy, Kjellgren (2021) distinguishes between two types of myths. He borrows the term *political myth* from the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer and explains that political myths are used to manipulate the masses and 'to fulfil a particular political purpose' (ibid.: 64-65). The *Madonna-Whore* myth that I address in this section, is a political myth. The *Madonna* and *Whore* are binary opposite stereotypical mother-objects created from within a patriarchal system where mothers must fulfil specific roles and appear in certain ways to serve the system or be punished. Kjellgren (ibid.) refers to Beauvoir as one of the first feminist thinkers to analyse myth, and as deeply suspicious of political myth. Beauvoir (1953) thinks of myth as a false discourse and asks for the rejection of myth in favour of grounding behaviour, feelings, and passion in *truth* (consider that Beauvoir wrote before postmodernism and the post-truth *zeitgeist* of today. There was a clear distinction between truth and fantasy/falseness, and myth, for her, was fantasy, therefore untrue). She dedicates an entire chapter in *The Second Sex* to explaining

the usefulness of myth to man within the patriarchy (ibid.). ‘The myth of woman is a luxury’, she says (1953: 289). ‘It can appear only if man escapes from the urgent demands of his needs; the more relationships are concretely lived, the less they are idealised’ (ibid.). Beauvoir believes that patriarchal mythmaking leaves women in the object position without any potential of becoming a real person, or subject. She says, in referring to the Woman myth, ‘[t]o pose Woman is to pose the absolute Other, without reciprocity, denying against all experience that she is subject, a fellow human being’ (1953: 283). The more the mother becomes a subject with her own lived experiences, the less it would be possible to fit her into *Madonna* or *Whore* stereotypes. We spoke often during our RPMs about the impossibility of meeting the elusive social expectation of what a mother is supposed to be; the *Madonna*, the object of child and patriarchy and of psychoanalysis (Raphael-Leff, 2009; 2010b). I referred to this impossibility in Chapter 5, and do so in this chapter and the next, as it is a central theme in my study, and pervasive throughout our conversations and the literature (Friedan, 1963; Lazarre, 1976; Knott, 2019; Greer, 2000; Hustvedt, 2021). The *Madonna* as a mythological patriarchal idea, and therefore political mythology in Cassirer’s sense, is generally rejected by RPs, as seen in the conversation between Tryfina and Veronica above.

Kjellgren (2021) also refers to later feminists Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway who adopt a more positive stance, and who see the potential of mythmaking for the feminist project. Braidotti and Haraway (in Kjellgren, 2021) both believe that there is feminist potential in political mythmaking. They see mythmaking (against the backdrop of postmodernism and new philosophies of subjectivity, and recent critical stances against absolute truth and objective reality) in a narrative, constructionist way, and, like Cixous (1976) and more recently Adichie (2014), they call upon feminists to make their own new stories. This is what we attempted to do with the storytelling during our RPMs, our WTs, and the creative material I wrote from the data. We did not shy away from a truth in favour of fiction, we rather co-created the subjective lived truths of a few ambivalent mothers into existence through the acts of telling and listening to them, with the hope that ours will contribute to a new, more appropriate mythology. In this way, we took the responsibility to try and influence, albeit on a very small scale, which

stories are told. This, I believe, is what Braidotti and Haraway mean with political mythmaking in a narrative, constructionist way (Kjellgren, 2021).

3.2 Sacral Myth

We read old stories to access wisdom, and we write our own new stories from them. We do not have to buy into the patriarchal *Madonna-Whore* myth, written by ‘the sons of the mothers’ (as mentioned in Chapter 5, Rich, 2021/1976: lix). Tryfina refers to Estés’ *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1992), and that she read it during the time of our RPMs and WTs. This book is a creation of women-as-subjects and their new stories through connection with old myths. Estés taps, in a narrative, constructionist way, into ancient female wisdom that predates capitalism, modernism, the patriarchy as we have known it in the post WW2 Western world. She introduces herself and her work in the following way:

My life and work as a Jungian analyst and *cantadora*, storyteller, have taught me that women’s flagging vitality can be restored by extensive ‘psychic-archaeological’ digs into the ruins of the female underworld. By these methods we are able to recover the ways of the natural instinctive psyche, and through its personification in the Wild Woman archetype, we are able to discern the ways and means of woman’s deepest nature. The modern woman is a blur of activity. She is pressured to be all things to all people. The old knowing is long overdue ... Fairy tales, myths, and stories provide understandings which sharpen our sight so that we can pick out and pick up the path left by the wildish nature. The instruction found in story reassures us that the path has not run out, but still leads women deeper, and more deeply still, into their own knowing. The tracks which we all are

following are those of the Wild Woman archetype, the innate instinctual Self (ibid.: 3 & 6).

In my study I am trying to focus on the ‘commonalities in imaginings of motherhood’ (Robbe, 2015: 14) across racial and other divides, even though RPs vary greatly in age (i.e. grew up and raised their children in different eras), and in a variety of social settings (Tryfina grew up as a Black woman in Apartheid South Africa, and May Thato in a rural village in Zimbabwe. The rest of the participants were not all White, but all grew up in Western contexts). I notice a difference between Tryfina, May Thato, and Simone’s material on one hand, and the rest of the RPs’ on the other. Tryfina and May Thato (from an African perspective), and Simone (from a longstanding background in transpersonal psychotherapy practices and readings), tap into a sacral mythology of motherhood more so than any of the other RPs. Their language and symbols (e.g. the river, the mother archetype) often referring to the transpersonal and the natural world, are melodic (have a singing quality) and speak to old universal wisdom that seems to belong to a sacral motherhood mythology. I ended Chapter 5 with the interaction between Tryfina and Veronica in which they try to navigate through their binary positions. Tryfina taps into a transpersonal sphere of the matriarchy, which is rejected by Veronica but wherein, for Tryfina, lies the possibility of language exploration and new stories. Tryfina believes in a sacral mythology to which all mothers belong, and Veronica rejects this idea, really rejecting the political myth in favour of the mothering task. Here, I bring a further contemplation in which Tryfina expresses her marvel as well as her overwhelm in the sacral:

Yes, we, we are multifaceted ... and with everything that you do, you bring all those facets with you ... whether it's the mothering work or any other work. But is it possible that we also haven't found the language to talk about how being responsible for another life changes one internally? Have we found the language? And is that language adequate? Because I somehow feel that part of the ... internal conflict is all the internalised stuff that we

carry with us ... from our cultures and families ... And because we can think and reflect about these things, the first instinct is to ... push against all of those things. And then this little life happens. And then somehow, perhaps, we start having an internal conflict. Because it does feel like something really deeply shifts when you realise, oh shit, you know, you have to take care of this... A feeling of inequality ... is in deep conflict with a pushing against this mythological motherhood ... this big narrative ... where you find you are never good enough because you can't match this deified thing (RPM5).

Simone brought an interesting perspective that I see as a cross-reference between political and sacral myth. She spoke about the archetypal mother (sacral myth) versus the ideal mother (political myth), but also ascribed subjective characteristics to the archetype:

Something I'm curious about is the difference between the archetypal mother *versus* the ideal mother ... The assumption ... is that the archetype holds the fiction and the light, but the archetype also holds the shadow... And it is actually something that surfaces in this conversation ... Part of the archetypal mother's job is to give a child a narrative. And that narrative is going to be like a fairy tale, with monsters in it ... Shadow and light... Light in it, spirit in it in some form. There might be certain characters that guide them even in the story, but the archetypal story, I think, of mothering, is something very different from ... this idealistic ... mother, and it feels more real ... And for me, there's something right if I think about the over-arching theme here, which is maternal ambivalence. It might be quite useful to tackle

... that archetypal mother. This is the ideal mother because the ambivalence is in the archetype (RPM3).

As we continued the conversation on mythmaking in our RPMs, we progressively disagreed more on the value of a greater collective mother mythology. We did not have the theory or vocabulary to distinguish between political- and sacral myth at the time (Kjellgren, 2021). It is clear, in hindsight, that we spoke about different things and from different worldviews. May Thato wrote about herself as part of a sacral motherhood mythology in her final WT, and I wrote the I-poem below from it:

I am a River (May Thato, WT5)

I am a river

I am a tributary

I am a source

I (cannot) really separate all my life experiences and allocate to one and the only:

I am a product of many sources, streams and rivers.

I, my water, speaks of all connections seen and unseen:

I can see ripples of me and others in my children.

I cannot separate where I start and where I end

I carry blockages that can slow the flow.

I stand in awe

I wonder how a seeming narrow trickle carried so much water.

I am a river, weaving myself through so many different terrains.

I celebrate motherhood,

I celebrate the rivers that we are!

The group's response to May Thato's river image was mostly positive. Yet, Veronica, speaking to political myth, opposed this image and the idea of tapping into a greater mythology:

I think it's a very nice image, but I think one can also balance it, or bring ... perspective. My worry is that we perhaps over-mythologise motherhood, or that motherhood assumes ... mythic proportions, and you can never really live inside a mythology. You can't, you can only live in your life, and life is not mythological, your life is domestic ... So, I have a sort of inbuilt resistance even to the word motherhood, because ... it's a mythologised word ... Because the danger is that you're going to measure yourself against the mythology of mothering ... So, I keep wanting to, my instinct is to want to ... make everything normal, not mythological, not bigger than normal. Normal, yes. So, ... my ... gut responses, actually, is to not think about motherhood, because the moment I begin to think about motherhood, I enter that mythological space. And I don't want to live inside a mythological space ... It doesn't mean ... one shouldn't think about being a mother, but one should think about all sorts of things. Think about being a teacher, or a nurse, or a role model, or a friend, or a mentor, you know, all of these. We play roles, we have roles, we have responsibilities in our lives that are related to work, family, children, and each of those, you just ... unfold within the normal language of your life. So, it's ... like discussing motherhood, and then getting to a point or discussing and reflecting on motherhood over the months that we have had, and then arriving at the point where I resist this mythology of motherhood. Just say no, I don't, I actually just want to be a

person, I don't want to be a mother because mother means something. It's too big (RPM5).

I responded by asking whether Veronica's resistance is linked to the idea that mythological places and roles refer to 'dehumanised' objects, and therefore do not refer to our real lives, but are also impossible to attain (RPM5). Veronica's response indicated something of her resistance to political as well as sacral mythology:

Uhm, I won't say they're dehumanised. I suppose I just also have a natural resistance to reifying anything. So, in other words, taking something and investing it with a kind of theological power. And it applies to anything, not just motherhood. Anything that starts to move into the realm of the ... extra human ... it's like, something bigger, bigger than the normal us, our normal selves ... The idea of motherhood keeps wanting to do that ... it's like a big sponge (RPM5).

I responded again, this time speaking to the relationship between mythological mother-objects (*Madonna* and *Whore*, as well as sacral mother-collective), and the subject-mother's mothering task:

I'm thinking about the idea of motherhood, which is ... a collective. And ... I'm wondering whether the difficulty also lies in the move between the individual mother and this, this big thing, or this big body of motherhood (RPM5).

The rest of the conversation moved between political and sacral mythology, the different roles that we play and the identity-weight that each role carries, and the feeling that the mother role outweighs any other roles in its impact on identity and the

command to responsibility. This conversation was highly emotive, with group members often interrupting each other, and all often talking at once. Herewith an extract from the conversation:

Don't we have multiple identities? So, I'm a mother, I'm a lawyer, I'm many other things, but the identity of a mother which is part of my identity, that is a shared identity. And then when I speak about motherhood, it's not necessarily that I reify it, it's saying that there's one part of my identity that I have in common with other people. And we seem to sometimes have the same struggles ... the same experiences ... I think therein lies for me the connection ... I know Mae got all these other identities, but she's also a mother and where our motherhood intersects, we share a lot of things. And that makes actually some sort of connection sometimes possible (Jackie, RPM5).

'Mother, suddenly, what the hell does that mean?' (Veronica, *ibid.*).

I think the idea of Mother is really something that has been handed down ... in different forms. And it seems to be so impossible to grasp, so ... impossible to be ... And so, if you [say] ... I'm a lecturer, immediately ... there's a whole lot of associations, and a whole lot of reference points. And ... when you say I'm a mother ... it almost becomes not ... external reference things, but it becomes an internal kind of questioning ... You know ... are you a good mother? Are you a helicopter mother? ... A tiger mother? ... One could ask whether you are ... a good lecturer, but no one will

question your lecturership, if I can call it that. No one will question that ...
And maybe that is the reifying or deifying of motherhood, that we kind of
kick against (Tryfina, *ibid.*).

...

That's what makes it so impossible to be ... that, because it's such a
universal thing ... if you become this [you're] supposed to become this
Mother Mary-thing with all the wisdom in the world, but it's fucking
impossible (chaos in the room, all talking together). Why is it in the
mothering role, and not in being a wife, in being a lecturer, in being a lover,
in being a sister, in being a potter? ... Why [is] it specifically because of the
mother role? (Esther, *ibid.*).

Because you're raising other human beings. Because you're bringing other
human beings into themselves ... that's the most important thing in the
world, to bring other human beings into being. And that's what you do as a
parent, actually, both father and mother, or mother and mother, or father
and father (Veronica, *ibid.*).

...

But then why is it (mothering) so undervalued? Because there's this sort of
very strange thing that happens. You are the custodians of the next
generation, and at the same time, you, the work that you do around that
doesn't matter (Tryfina, *ibid.*).

In the I-poem below, Tryfina grappled with how to *be* as a mother. She oscillated
between her fantasy of a healing mother's lap (*Madonna*) and holding on too tightly

(Anguished Ambivalent Mother); mothering with a loose, open hand (Integrated Ambivalent Mother) or locking the kids away as protection (Madonna), and letting them go as adult children (Integrated Ambivalent Mother):

I Want to Smooth Out the Messy Edges (Tryfina, WT1)

I want to edit, delete, rewrite, smooth out the messy edges of life

I realise, the mother of adult children,

I need to tiptoe around the edges, before

I enter

I (have) always felt so tentative and uncertain?

I felt that at times

I was primarily concerned, but, here

I am

I am a hinderance or some help?

I can identify

I feel, if

I could sit on my mother's lap

I can't remember ever sitting on her lap

I think

I have always had mixed feelings

I had a sense, mothering with a loose open hand

I did not always know how

I did the busy stuff

I watched the super mums

I felt guilty

I was a working mum

I loved coming home at the end of the day

I felt competent and accomplished and

I found myself in a strange world, (two worlds)

I found my grip tightening

I am sure, sometimes, I held on so tightly

I suppose the hardest part

I realised

I had turned into a version of my mother

*I could lock them in a room and throw the key away. That would keep them safe,
wouldn't it?*

I am not sure when

I managed to relax

I have always accepted that

I have had glimpses of the woman

I had set out to find

I liked what I saw, sometimes

I felt lost and alone, sometimes

I could still the cacophony

I listened to the heartbeat

I found

I settled within myself

I had to, who

I am

I found that the hand holding tightly was not mine

I am not allowed to parent

I have to mother. How do

I do that?

I find myself within these murky waters. Where?

I find myself in strange territory

I do not recognise these bits of my heart anymore.

My sense of Tryfina's grappling between these roles produced a confusion in me which speaks to my ambivalence as mother. It is simply not possible to know exactly how to *be* as a mother:

Edit,

delete,

rewrite.

Tentative,

uncertain.

Hindrance or help?

Ambivalence.

4. TO BE MOTHER OR AN OTHER

4.1 Instinctual Desire for Children?

Within the patriarchy it is often assumed that maternal desire is instinctual. Rich explains that the patriarchy needs motherhood and heterosexuality 'in their institutional forms' for its mere survival, and therefore they have to be seen as accepted truths, or axioms, 'as "nature" itself, not open to question except where, from time to time and place to place, "alternate life-styles" for certain individuals are tolerated' (2021/1976: 26). Letherby (1994) confirms the above by explaining that women in Western society live within the assumption that all women are mothers, or want to be mothers, and that motherhood equals adulthood and marriage (or a permanent relationship with a man). Feminists have widely been opposing this biological deterministic stance (Beauvoir, 1953; Letherby, 1994; Hrdy, 2000; Raphael-Leff, 2010b). Hrdy (2000) believes that mother love is a recent cultural invention, and that it is not instinctual to love one's child.

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If this is the case, then my ambivalence around spending time and effort on other things and not only on my children makes sense. I am not biologically programmed to love my child, but convinced by social norms, so it is normal that I would choose myself first – at least sometimes – and then feel guilty about it and be punished by society for not sticking to the norm. I feel guilty even feeling and then thinking and then typing this out loud.

Radical feminist Shulamith Firestone goes as far as to argue that women's role as mothers is the cause of their oppression within the patriarchal system, and that 'women should be freed from the "tyranny of their reproductive biology" by any means available' (cited by Letherby, 1994: 527). This opinion has been rejected by more moderate feminists who maintain that feminism promotes women as a collective, and therefore also the diversity of women's experiences. Yet, Beauvoir famously said that:

It is in maternity that woman fulfils her physiological destiny; it is her natural 'calling', since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species. But we have seen already that human society is never abandoned wholly to nature (1953: 501).

I referred to this quote in Chapter 5 and repeat it here for, as I see it, the reference is to a deep ambivalence between so-called biology or nature and an assumption that all women would want to follow it, many woman-subjects' social beliefs and pressures, and the fantasy that we can all choose. Beauvoir also speaks to the idea that reproduction is 'no longer at the sole mercy of biological chance; it has come under the voluntary control of human beings' (ibid.). From the above it can be deduced that inherent maternal instinct in all women is a fallacy, that we (or our husbands or lovers) can nowadays biologically control our decisions to have children or not. But, I am wondering, at what social and intrapsychic cost?

4.2 Choosing to be a Mother or an Other

Knott talks about the separation of women's mind from physical body from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and that this class distinction seems to have given women of higher social classes, 'above the degree of chambermaid or laundress', more power over their physical bodies (2019: 49). But power over own body or not, Letherby (1994, 2022) states that women are still socially defined by being mothers or not (defined by *what they do not have* as 'not mother, nonmother, childless, childfree', Letherby, 2022: 19), and either judged as selfish by their decision to be voluntarily without children, or pitied, 'desperate', for involuntary childlessness (ibid.). Knott says that 'labour was God's punishment of Eve's sin', of being too much of the *Whore*, 'and his rod of correction meted out pains to be patiently borne' (2019: 59). But Knott further states that mothering as destiny has since been replaced by mothering as dilemma (ibid.). So, how much of a choice do Western, middleclass women in seemingly free societies have if no other role will be as fulfilling in the eyes of patriarchal society? Letherby (1994) believes that social attitudes motivate women to judge their own self-worth against their desires and/or abilities to mother. Women and men are made to believe that women are only fulfilling their true potential if they have a child (see Chapter 5 for a discussion on maternal hierarchy). Rich (2021/1976) quotes three hair-raising statements made by psychiatrists on the subject of women who tried, in one way or another, to resist the institutional demand to have children. All three statements are blatantly pathologising the women in question (I acknowledge that these statements were written during the mid-1970's, and believe that, at least in my country, they will presently be dismissed as unconstitutional. Yet, they help making an argument that so-called freedom of choice is a fallacy within patriarchal systems). The first statement reads:

The very fact that a woman cannot tolerate pregnancy, or is in intense conflict about it, or about giving birth to a child, is an indication that the pre-pregnant personality of this woman was immature and in that sense can be

labelled as psychopathological (see Rich, 2021/1976: 272 for the complete statements).

The concept of choice regarding motherhood is 'something of a red herring' (Letherby, 1994: 362), and always made within social conditions and personal psychologies (also see Chapter 5 for a discussion on mother as sole or primary identity). Beauvoir (1953: 512) writes about the ambivalence of the mother/other choice. She describes pregnancy as a drama playing itself out between the woman's 'self and self', as an enriching as well as a mutilating experience. She describes the foetus as:

Part of her body, and at the same time a parasite exploiting her; she possesses, and is possessed by it; it contains her whole future and, bearing it inside her, she feels as vast as the world; but this very richness annihilates her, and she feels she is nothing (ibid.).

Beauvoir believes a woman has a choice, and that she 'must choose between asserting her transcendence (as subject) and her alienation as object', and, I assume she implies, then live with the consequences of her choice (Beauvoir cited by Rose, 2018: 133). But, as we know, by far not all (even Western, middle class) women can choose, and those who can choose are not all able to fall pregnant. Although not one of us RPs expressed having children against our will, we did not all actively choose to become mothers. During RPM1 Tryfina and May Thato briefly spoke about 'falling into' motherhood (Tryfina's words), and then there was no mention of this topic again until I actively asked about it during RPM5. Tryfina said:

I was also thinking about, have we read too much? ... I think I started out being very clear that I don't want children, you know, but ... life's just got a strange way of just interfering with one's best planned things. And then ...

there was something about the by-the-way-ness of [having] children (RPM1).

May Thato later referred to Tryfina's comment above with her own story of 'getting into motherhood' (see quote below). (May Thato grew up in a village where children were raised by mothers and allomothers. She moved to a city on a different continent to study, and had her first child there. Her comment below on what scared her should be read against that background):

Tryfina, when you spoke about how you just got into motherhood ... I've never thought about what kind of mother am I. Do I want children or not? How am I going to love my children? You know, I had all these grandmothers and them, aunties and them. Somehow, it's almost ... automatic [that] you know how to take care ... I was a teenage mom, as you saw. The only thing that scared me was [that] there weren't relatives [close by]. But it's almost like I knew somehow that I'll do it. Didn't I look after children when I was small? But listening to you again, I realised that, you know, I must have had a huge anxiety (RPM1).

'Motherhood without autonomy, without choice', says Rich, 'is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control' (2021/1976: 273). Below is a drama I wrote, mainly using our own words (direct quotes from the raw data), from a conversation between us during RPM5, on how each one of us became a mother; some 'getting into motherhood' without much consideration, because that is what women do, and others considering, choosing to have children.

Mothers Become Them – A Drama (Written from a conversation during RPM5)

Characters:

Narrator (Jackie)

Veronica

Mae

Simone

Nadine

Tryfina

Esther

The scene:

Seven mothers around a dinner table, heavy under food and drink, candles and music setting the tone. They know one another well by now. Meeting often to discuss little bits of this and that as well as the heaviness, and lightness, of being in this Mother Life. Asking for and sharing advice, tricks of this trade, and sometimes even recipes. A luxury, it is; a mother allowing herself hours at a time without partners, children, cell phones, chores, the mental load. But today there is not much left to talk about. The arrangement was that we would meet only for this year. What lies beyond this, who knows? The continuation of hours, days, school-term-after-school-term, new life phases; living consciously, and making meaning one bite at a time. But after this, we know we are not alone.

Narrator (to Veronica):

Have you ever had brain fog, Veronica?

Narrator (to audience):

I know I am asking my rational mother-friend this question because of my own brain fog. Since the birth of my first, I have not been able to string three intelligible sentences together, let alone a second order argument imperative for the protection of my (mostly innocent) accused clients.

Veronica: I'm sure I've had.

Narrator (*to audience*): She has no clue what I am talking about.

Narrator (*to Veronica*): I still sometimes struggle to find a specific word.

Mae: But it might also be from your COVID last year?

Narrator (*to audience*): Mae is saving me, bless her.

Narrator (*under her breath*): Or maybe it's just in general. Why don't I just shout it out loud, that new mothers have porridge brain, feel dumb, forget how to do adult conversation? It happens to all of them. Some recover, some never do.

Mae: Also, like fullness of one's brain, and busyness. There's just so many different things going on simultaneously. How to compartmentalise and keep everything in its place? It's not how it used to be when I was younger. There's definitely more going on now. At the same time, there's this whole mothering role which is so pervasive.

Narrator (*to the rest*): How did you get to becoming a mother?

Veronica (*laughing out loud*): Some people just had sex without planning.

Narrator: I don't know. Is that the case for anyone here?

Narrator (*to audience*): Not that they would admit, would they? How safe would a conversation have to be for us to admit that

many of us had oopsies. Unplanned pregnancy, that's not good for the child's story.

Mae: We're all quite complicated, I have to say.

Narrator (*to audience*): Kind Mae is really doing the saving of us all.

Tryfina: Yes, I never questioned that I would. Because it was just something that your body, something that you do.

Narrator (*to Tryfina*): Because that's social expectation? That's what the picture is supposed to look like?

Tryfina: I never had one idea that I would not like to have children. But I think somehow, sort of, like getting married, children were part of a whole sort of, uhm ...

Narrator (*to audience*): That's interesting. I remember Tryfina previously telling a different version of this story to May Thato; that she never thought she would have children. Clearly the mother-ambivalence playing itself out here. I am reminded that all of us construct the story-versions that work in particular contexts, making life up as we go along.

Simone (*to Tryfina*): Reason for marriage?

Tryfina: No, that was not the reason for getting married.

Narrator (*trying to help Tryfina*): Part of the package?

Tryfina: Yes, part of the package. You know, when my husband and I talked about having children, our pictures were very different. He was going to sit at a table with all these children around it and I thought, oh my God, I was thinking two, max.

Narrator (*testing responses*): I knew I always wanted to have children; I didn't necessarily want the husband.

Tryfina: No, I was quite sure I wasn't gonna be a single mom.

Narrator: I had grand ideas about being a single mom.

Tryfina: No, I think it came from watching my mother, she was widowed at a very young age. So, when she was left single she had all these children from big to small, and I remember thinking that it's not the funfair. It was hard on her.

Veronica: I thought I could have a child on an adventure somewhere.

Narrator (*smiling at Veronica*): Would you bring the child back home with you after the adventure?

Veronica: I wasn't gonna have children, but my husband, he's a children's person, said he'd really love children. But he couldn't have children.

Mae (*looks surprised*): Not a deal breaker?

Veronica:

No. I didn't need children for a very long time. Our lives were quite peripatetic, and that life is easier without children. When we came back to South Africa something just sort of turned. Settling, getting a job, acquiring a house, should we have a child, a dog, or budgies? And suddenly there was a conversation. It took two years to adopt a child. Halfway into that process the light came on for me, and my husband suddenly got cold feet. I said to him, this child is happening, you are in or out. Like the train has left the station and you can't get off. I remember very distinctly having only one experience where I felt like a bodily need for children, but it lasted for about three minutes. I was in my mid 20's, walked past a nursery school and I stopped at the fence. These kids hung on the fence, and I had a physical – what I think people call broody – feeling. It literally was a very strong emotional, physical feeling, and then it was gone. It never came back again. And even being a mother, I never had that broody feeling. I've never had it since.

Simone (*to Esther*):

And you?

Esther (*caught off guard*):

Me? I wasn't broody either. I was something like an after-the-fact broody when I breastfed my children, but only for that time. In my 20's I thought I wouldn't have children. In my 30's I said maybe one day. I was 38 when I went to the gynae, and he asked me what my plan was. I said I might have kids one day and he asked me whether I was out of my fucking

mind. Two or three months later I was pregnant, and I was a bit freaked out. I was 42 when my second child was born. Not ever before that wanting to even try, rebelling with all my might, then for a moment succumbing to the thing that one has to do. You have to decide now or it's too late, and I thought – not felt, thought – that I'd regret not having a child when it was too late. The pull to have a child wasn't there but the push towards having children when I am old was.

Veronica:

I had friends who seemed to have had some biological needs to have children. I know people do and I think that's completely normal, but for me to be in the physical process of pregnancy was not important at all. I'm sure it's an experience that is important in some way, but it's not mine.

Esther (*to Veronica*):

I haven't had that biological need either. I did enjoy being pregnant and to breastfeed, but that was a bonus.

Veronica:

I come from a family of five siblings. My parents both wanted many children, but there was never any pressure from my parents or anyone in my family to have their own. I don't even remember a discussion with my parents ever about that. It was completely not an issue. And I'm sure secretly or even not secretly my parents thought it would be nice to have grandchildren. They never voiced that.

Mae (*to no-one in particular*):

In my 20's, I decided that I wasn't going to have children. And then, I think when I was around 32, something shifted. I suddenly felt that I'll miss out on some experience of life. I was single, and I was considering having a child by myself. So, I looked into sperm donation and what it would involve, and I talked to my mom about it to see what kind of support I could rely on her for. So, I thought I'll do it by myself. I felt very strongly that I didn't want to rely on a man to make that decision. So, I was very close to that point, and then I met my husband. He's a teacher, he loves children, he's nine years older than me, and he already thought that his ship had sailed. So, it wasn't too long. It was important to me that whoever was going to be the father was going to be an amazing father, regardless of whether they were going to be a good partner, because I have such a crap father. We had decided that we'll try and have kids and if we can't, then we'll adopt. I fell pregnant very quickly. But what was difficult for me was that my husband felt strongly about not having any tests done. Whether that child survives for five minutes after they're born or live a life on life support. That's the child's story and that's my husband's story, that's our story, even if it meant that our relationship didn't survive. That was the hard part for me in choosing to conceive, no matter what. I just had to trust life. I realise now what a strong pull it must have been to want to have a child that I was willing to just trust that everything would be okay. Now I hear how hectic that is. It is hectic. And I didn't tell anyone; I didn't tell my family and

my friends because I think I must have been aware that it was a big leap to take. But if I'm honest, I struggle now. Having had kids, I feel like it's the hardest thing in the world. Now I have these two people that mean more to me than anything else, that mean more to me than me. And I live in constant, you know, my life is on an edge. It was easier to just worry about myself. At least, that's what I had fantasised.

Simone (*to Mae*):

I *so* relate to that. I really do. That's part of why I wasn't going to have children. Not knowing that that was the reason. So, I also didn't get the clock. My husband wanted children since the beginning. He wanted five. Eventually he said he will settle for anything.

Everybody laughing.

Simone:

We can wait until I'm ready, you know, and he really didn't push me, it was very clear. If you're not ready, it's not gonna work. So, I wait. And it wasn't that I decided I'm not gonna have children. I just thought a clock will come and then I will have children.

Veronica (*to Simone*):

It also demonstrates his absolute belief that at some point you would be ready. Because he could have said no, he could have said, well, this person is not ready and may never be really, and I can't risk that.

Simone:

Yes, it could have happened that way. I've got an amazing man, I just realised. And it got to a point

where I said to him, but I don't think I want children, and will that be an option for you? And he just said if that's really the case, if you're 100% clear, I'll let it go.

Esther: Jissus.

Simone: And then I thought, well, for you I'll ...

Veronica (*laughing*): For you I'll give a child!

Simone: I went into therapy, and that was what I worked with. I had a profound session where I realised that I never fully committed to being in life, and I knew rationally that if I give birth, the love is gonna be of such a nature that I'm gonna have to fully commit to being in life. There's always been a part of me that thought I could eject. I knew I was gonna make myself vulnerable, and that scared the shit out of me. That option was off the table. After that we fell pregnant literally the first time we didn't use contraceptives. I'm very happy with it, and with everything that comes with it. But I had to work to get there. It wasn't easy for me.

Veronica: I think I decided at a certain point, okay, I could do this, because it's really important to the person I'm with. I didn't need to have children, but I could entertain the idea. And because the other person in the partnership really did want children, I said let's go there. So, for the first part of the process, it was it was like buying a house, actually. Okay, now,

what do we do? We go to a meeting, then we go to the social worker, and we have several sessions with her, and she asks us about our ideas of parenting.

It was a logistical decision, and you have to go through the paperwork. Adoption is a process of paperwork and then at a certain point that idea of actually being a parent. I thought if I were pregnant, it would be very different. Because this child is external to me the process is external to me. It's practical; it's about having the money, the space, are our pets gonna be happy with the situation? And I thought everybody who has children should go through this planning process.

And then when they came to do the home visit I quickly went out and bought a pair of fluffy child slippers and stuck them somewhere, because we had nothing. Those bunny slippers, my child could only fit into them when she was about four. But there were these slippers, in this room, in the house. I'm sure those social workers, they just wanted to know that there were four walls, and no Pitbull in the backyard and a pool with no fence around, and no dangerous gas bottles around.

Jackie: And yet, if you have a uterus...

Mae (*shouting*): That's the craziest part!

Nadine: Yes, I agree. You have to do all these assessments if you want to adopt.

Esther: That's incredible.

Mae (*to Esther*): Isn't it incredible? Imagine how many divorces and how much child abuse and neglect would be avoided if everyone had to go through a process.

Nadine (*to Veronica*): I think it's a similar thing, a partner who wanted a child more than I did. And possibly a kind of latent unconscious desire on my part, which I only realised once the child was home. But I had no real passion or no real interest. I was quite absorbed in what I was doing, but then obviously I understood that it would be fine, I'm happy to be dragged along.

Veronica (*to Nadine*): But you do get dragged along and then suddenly the change happens.

Nadine (*suddenly animated*): Yes. Something didn't happen until the child came home. Even then, for me it was an absolute shock. I've always wondered about people who had a biological child, about the absolute shock.

Mae: Absolute shock! That's exactly what happened to me!

Nadine: Yes. No, no amount of preparation helps.

Mae: Absolutely, I thought it was going to, something would kick in with pregnancy or childbirth.

Veronica: Something *natural*.

Mae: Yes. The natural thing. I was just crippled by anxiety the first five or six months.

Narrator: With every pregnancy. I think it's the sleep deprivation. Everytime complete shock. And then you forget completely. I think maybe the hormones after birth helped a little bit to forget. Once they're two years old you think, ah, I can have another one.

Everybody laughing and talking together.

Mae: The body doesn't really remember physical pain. Well, I mean, at least the female body. I think that's because of giving birth, maybe.

Simone: No, I remembered. I was very clear if I was going to do it again, Caesarean. But I almost died.

Veronica: It does help to get a child six months old from a woman who's fostered 43 babies, and the child arrives with instructions.

Everybody laughing.

Veronica: And they go up on the fridge, the instructions I mean. This woman knew exactly what she was doing. She had a list of 60 points. It was incredible.

Simone: Now I'm thinking about business ideas. When you get your first baby and you're at home, you pay women like that a good salary and they get your child into the rhythm.

Mae: In the madness of child of my loins I should know it's me, there's something wrong with me.

Veronica: We would go out to book launches and art exhibitions with this very good, very secure contented child. And people would say, what did you do? We were clueless.

Mae: I was so prepared for that birth. I couldn't have read more, researched more. But I never thought of what happens when the baby's there. I remember refusing to swaddle. I thought I'd strain it.

Narrator (*to audience*): And so it went. For hours on end. And we all came out of the conversation with a sense that, whatever our stories are, however different from the other mothers', we are normal.

Every time I reread this story I am under the impression of the absence in it of women who choose not to have children and the women who do not have the privilege of choice. I remember that this study represents a small group of women. I am grateful that I had a choice. I am also wondering whether this choice – and the privilege of getting what I wanted – contributes to ambivalence about other roles. My super-ego and/or a faceless social voice reminding me that I chose this, now deal with it.

5. ALL ROLES COMPETE FOR TIME, EFFORT, AND MONEY

This section refers to Chapter 5 in which I discussed typical gender roles and the mother's mental load. From that discussion it was clear that the mother plays many different roles, and often keeps many juggling balls in the air. What am I as mother allowed to claim for myself – sometimes at the cost of my children, partner, others? What is expected from mothers *versus* what they are allowed to claim for themselves is an ongoing intrapsychic conflict, and often an external conversation. Many mothers

experience the mother role as a constant push-pull struggle with failure. Mothers often find themselves in a 'battle to maintain any solid sense of choice or desire', leading to her subjectivity threatened (Baraitser & Noack, 2007: 179). Even though mothers may acknowledge their ambivalence, they still often feel ashamed, confused, angry and reproachful towards themselves, and experience judgement and punishment from self and others. Ambivalence is often pronounced when mothers must navigate between decisions about time, effort, and money claims related to their different roles. Baraitser and Noack (ibid.) define a resilient mother as someone who has the ability to uphold herself as a mother, as well as uphold the guilt arising from her ambivalent feelings towards her child. I am adding that a resilient mother (or, referring to the conversation earlier in this chapter, an *Integrated Ambivalent Mother*) is a mother who is able to uphold herself as mother-subject who plays many roles, knowing that she will often make time, effort, and money decisions in favour of one role and at the cost of another, and to bear the ambivalent feelings that arise from these decisions.

The roles that were most prominent in our conversations, and which featured in our WTs, were the working mother/student mother, and the school mom. The mother as daughter, the mother of two or more children, the mother as other people's friend, and other roles (e.g. potter or athlete) were mentioned briefly, and although they are all laden with intense ambivalence for some of us, they will not be discussed here because of a dearth of data. The mother as lover was almost completely absent. I see the absence of this role in the data as significant, and I will therefore spend some time on it too.

5.1 Working Mother/Student Mother

The familial and social expectation of a working mother/student mother is often to concurrently also fulfil the roles of *Whore* (devalued houseworker, child minder, and sexual partner), and running the mental load, to get it all right, and to present as an *Integrated Ambivalent Mother*. Olivier writes about the 'psychic disturbance by way of an exclusively feminine upbringing and education' created by a (patriarchal, capitalist) society in which the father's mostly superior salary is the reason for children spending too much time with their 'permanently present mother' (1989: 131). Even though this

scenario has changed in many societies since Olivier's publication in the late 1980's, the majority of us RPs reported spending substantially more time with their children than their partners do, and are more flexible with working hours to accommodate their mothering tasks. During a conversation about what we do with our time, Veronica expressed feeling stifled by having her child around her too often. She said:

Isn't the problem also that ... we spend too much time with our kids? I mean, that's been COVID probably. But in general, we're just with our kids too often. ... Are we just with each other too much? We don't have ... space. We need that, we all need that, our children need that, our children don't need to be with us all the time. And I think they're growing up like that ... A lot of my childhood was spent out of the purview of parents, I wasn't with my parents all the time (RPM2).

Jackie responded: 'But do you think we feel guilty? And then ...' (ibid.). Veronica did not feel guilty: 'No, I think it's just circumstantial' (ibid.). Jackie did: 'I think sometimes I feel guilty for not spending enough time (with my children). I think we spend too much time with our children. But what is spending time?' (ibid.). Simone reflected on her own experience of her child being in her space too often:

You know, sometimes he just hangs around the room and you actually just want to fuck off. One time I did that with [my son]. I just stormed out and he looked at me and I said I need time out; I now also have a time-out room. I got better results with putting myself in the time-out room than I ever got putting him there (Simone, RPM2).

Olivier (1989) points out that the nuclear family does not provide for children to spend sufficient time with other members of the extended family and therefore have no choice

but to talk within the nuclear family, and ‘causes increasing tension between parents and children’ (ibid.: 132). In rereading Veronica and Jackie’s conversation and Simone’s later comment, I feel a surge of intensity, and I know that I project onto their memories my own frustrations of not having enough time for myself. I read Rich:

Not being explosive will do nicely as a definition of what is mostly asked of mothers, although, as any mother will testify, explosive is what she, to her utter dismay, often feels: there is nobody in the world that I love as much as my child, nobody in the world who makes me as angry. It is this demand – to be respectable and inexplusive – that I see as most likely to drive mothers, and by extension their [children], crazy (ibid., 2021/1976: 125-126).

I suddenly, with utter surprise, remember a quote that was engrained in me at an early age: ‘I will lift my eyes to the mountains. From whence shall my help come?’ (Psalm 121:1, Amplified Bible), and I remind myself of the intensity, and sometimes desperation, of maternal ambivalence. I wrote a story about the intense physicality of my mothering experience, and the ambivalent feelings in returning to work after the birth of my first child:

Call Her Mother: A New Mother’s Story of Going Back to Work (October 2023)

She has been back at work for God-knows-how-many weeks, and still not able to pull herself together. She feels nothing for the patient sessions that she has been cancelling one after the other after the other after day after day after week after week. It is 10 am on another Monday morning. She has locked her office door, turned up the radio (breast pump designers are not breastfeeding mothers. They do not know the decibels and the distinctly recognisable pulsing-sucking sound of a gulping pump. They have never walked past a locked office door and heard the sound of a desperately lonely mother feeding a thirsty plastic bottle her child’s next meal. They

are men, those breast pump designers, doing their jobs, earning their families' grub. They don't fucking care a drop more).

Another example of my own ambivalence, albeit less intense than the above, and this time regarding my decision to do this study comes from a reflective journal inscription that I made early in my study (March 2021):

My husband and the kids are helping the school principal moving the school to a new neighbourhood. I thrive on the quiet of the house that lies behind me. From today I will be writing a few thoughts before continuing with reading or writing what I need to be reading or writing for the day. From now I will also be going to work every day, whether I have a patient session or seminar, or not. Therefore, creating structure and predictable working hours. I feel guilty towards my husband who needs to tend to the house and mind the kids, and I feel guilty towards the kids for my distracted mind, but this is a time-limited project. I believe that the damage to them would have been more had I not pursued it. So, I am fully capable of writing a beautiful document. I am fully capable of doing a rigorous study. I am more than excited to explore this field. What it needs is a lot of time and attention.

Hrdy (2000), as mentioned earlier, refers to Bowlby's attachment theory and the double bind for a mother wanting to work and to have children. 'After the first weeks ... it became increasingly apparent that in the world I lived in, caring for a baby was incompatible with concentrated work' (ibid.: xii). We know that it becomes increasingly more possible to go back to concentrated work as the child grows older (depending on the clearance of brain fog, that is). But we also know that a mother is, at least for the first eighteen years of her child's life, on standby to a greater or lesser extent. Even May Thato and Tryfina, the two RPs with adult children, reported feeling ambivalent about how much time, effort, and money to spend on their children. May Thato writes about her ambivalence towards her mother for not being present in the way she would have wanted her to be, and about her own decision to leave her son with allomothers to get an education in a different country. I wrote the I-poem below from her writing:

I Sat with the Discomfort, Gratitude, Peace, and Pride (May Thato, WT1)

I couldn't speak yet, my mother fell pregnant

I had never uttered the word Mhaye/Mama

I grew up angry with my mother, ashamed

I know that

I vowed that I would not fall pregnant while

I was at school

I would have a profession

I fell pregnant at 18

I was not there when my son would have learnt to utter Mama

I notice how he refers to his someone as Mama

I am silently envious

I was the main breadwinner

I was being stretched and intruded upon

I resented that

I imagine my mother, yet

I had a sense of being competent

I had no family support system (abroad)

I was a teenage Mum

I remember (benevolent social worker) Sarah who made regular visits

I cared and played with my son

I was happy too

I realised it was me and him against the unknown

I like being a mother?

I have never doubted

I can look after a child, babysitting

I could soothe babies

I had the support, it was hard

I was the go-to babysitter

*I heard myself saying Malo-malo-malo, playing with my granddaughter, like my
grandmother with my cousins*

I later grew up with –

I was the chief granddaughter

I was adored by her and many

I was surrounded by children who had mothers

I remember my aunt calling her boys with sing-song voices

I wished I had a mother who could call me that way

I remember wanting to call my aunt mother

I was shy

I just called her Mama one day

I remember too the language of the breast. Recently

I heard that her mother passed away while she was an infant on the breast

I know I was able to be like that with my children

I wished someone could take care of my elder son

I saw him again when he was five years old

I remember the sense of guilt I felt when

I brought him more clothes, more goodies, am

I entitled to offer him more special time, as his mother?

I was torn, naturally loving him unconditionally

I had little time to spend with him before disappearing, my education

I could offer him a better life

I did not want to lead the life my mother led

I wanted my son to have more

I remember a sinking feeling

I had to leave him, the unshed tears, and the protective armour

I had to wear when

I walked out

I have done how much damage to my children?

I have wondered

I have been mis-attuned?

I sat with the discomfort, also a sense of gratitude, some peace and pride

Can a mother ever grow out of the ambivalence? I think not, at least not many of them/us. The concept of freedom is covered extensively by existentialist philosophy and discussed in Chapter 7. Here, I offer a snapshot into my reflective journal. It was a good day, a day when I managed to convince myself that I am allowed a life without maternal ambivalence:

Reflective Journal (August 2022)

I finished the final transcript this morning, then allowed myself to finish Joan Didion's Blue Nights (2021) – in the middle of a school day. I love her:

I do not know many people who think they have succeeded as parents. Those who do tend to cite the markers that indicate (their own) status in the world: the Stanford degree, the Harvard MBA, the summer with the white-shoe law firm. Those of us less inclined to compliment ourselves on our parenting skills, in other words most of us, recite rosaries of our failures, our neglects, our derelictions and delinquencies. The very definition as a parent has undergone a telling transformation: we used to define success as the ability to encourage the child to grow into independent (which is to say into adult life), to 'raise' the child, to let the child go (ibid.: 93).

I could make a living out of staying at home, reading and writing on motherhood, and doing a bit of laundry, dishes, kitchen, beds, etcetera in between – as mothers seem to do. Total integration between task one and two and formal and informal and children and other stuff. I have the luxury of one week alone in my apartment. I also now have the freedom to call my week at a time away from the children a luxury. Without guilt, I think, by now. Or is it? I would not have been able to finish this study or mind my own business if the kids were with me, alone with me, all the time. I would have finished this study if I were still in the house with my spouse and the kids in between. Of course. I would have been more resentful of him, and I would have been a really, really serious witch of a mother. I have realised progressively more during the last months how much I enjoy my children. I am acutely aware of their physical presence and proximity when they are here. I miss them dearly, wonder about them, really think about them, try to remember every detail of them when they are not. I suspect (hope) they like me too nowadays, more than in the past. That they also appreciate me when we are together, that they know I keep them in mind and really see them. I listen to other mothers around the table; an echo of mothers with young children in society's narrative. I hear their resentments towards partners for not doing their part, the eternal maternal load, their having to find stolen moments for their self-care, and the guilt around those moments. And I feel a tremendous relief.

But, as I said, I wrote the above journal inscription on a good day, a small pocket in a sea of ambivalence. What follows is a discussion on the different roles prominent in our RPMs and the accompanying feelings of ambivalence. I also discuss the significance of the absence of the mother lover in the RPMs.

5.2 School Mom

I started the previous section with the familial and social expectations placed onto working mothers/student mothers. For RPs, the list of expectations included success at being a good school mom. Reference to this role was pervasive throughout our conversations; some participants amid it with children still at school, and some reminiscing about those years, with astounding clarity in their recollections. (I found it interesting that, when referring to this role, *mother* suddenly became *mom*. The

participants sometimes referred to this same role as *supermom*. *Mom*, for me, is a more informal, more intimate word than *mother* when used by a child, but also, in this context used by other mothers, a derogatory term referring to a devalued role). It will become clear in the next argument that the participants did not feel neutral about the school mom role; they either judged themselves against the women who seem to do this job well, or judged themselves as superior to those mothers. This ongoing conversation started with a gossip session in the first meeting (more about this below) followed by frequent reference to those mothers who seem to get it right. Tryfina decided at some point to give up on succeeding in this role:

You know, often, always ... there's no ... flaw on their make-up ... their cookies never look like it was (baked) in a hurry ... Everything is just so ... I just thought it so much work. But ... maybe there was a bit of envy ... I wish I could do that (RPM1).

I responded with intensity:

There's tremendous ... judgment of myself, also the envy that you're talking about ... I'm comparing myself. You get a makeup artist for your kids' Halloween attire. Why? Because you [have] time to think about the makeup, and of course you've got money ... I'm failing because I don't even have an eyeliner to draw a spider on my child's cheek, and I struggle with judgment a lot, a lot. And I think my criticism ... of those moms as a projection, has a lot to do with my failure. Yes, society, whatever, that internal voice thing (RPM1).

Tryfina responded with, 'I must be honest; at some point I gave up. I gave up on this' (ibid.), to which Jackie responded, laughingly, following by laughter from all: 'On the kids or on the mothering?' (ibid.). Tryfina: 'On this supermom business' (ibid.).

The RPMs were without specifically planned agenda points as this study was a social construction (see Chapter 4 on methodology). Yet, in retrospect, as I read through the RPM transcripts, I catch myself out for asking strategic questions, surely with the hope to get data to substantiate my personal agenda. Knowledge is never created objectively and without agenda or power relations (see the discussion on the politics of epistemology in Chapter 2). My story is one of intrapsychic and social judgement and punishment, as shown in Chapter 3, and evident in Chapter 7 on judgement, punishment, disobedience, transgression, and freedom. My response to Tryfina's disclaimer, that she has given up on 'this supermom business' (RPM1), is proof of this:

Okay, so what was the cost? That's what I'm interested in. What was the cost of giving up on the supermom thing? Did you allow yourself and if you freed yourself from the expectation that you feel guilty, did you feel lacking, what was that? Do you have any kind of a thought around it? (RPM1).

It was so interesting listening to you feeling guilty about not being that supermom. I was starting to feel good, because I definitely do not feel guilty enough! In a very kind way, okay, be patient with them, they do not know what they are doing. I judge them, and I have to really work at it. I've got to really work at getting off my high horse and take a humble pill, and practice kindness. And not think that [I've got it all worked out]. Yes, it's a huge form of entertainment, in a way, for me (Simone, RPM1).

The above interaction is a clear example of how intrapsychic and social judgement are echoes of each other, mirror images of the same thing. I extrapolate on this idea in Chapter 7. For this discussion, to come back to the impossibility of one of the mother's roles will suffice.

5.3 Mother-Lover

I did not find any traces of or even overt reference to the RPs' relationships to sex and to their bodies during the RPMs. Even though I would classify most of the RPs as somewhere between *Integrated* and *Anguished Ambivalent Mothers*, the idea of mother as sexual subject, or even object, seemed to be a conversational taboo. I found this absence in conversation peculiar, especially against the background of our discussions of the *Madonna-Whore* myth. The *Whore* as devalued houseworker and the *Madonna* were discussed at length. Why did we not talk about the *Whore* as sexual being; partner/subject/object/anything? A further realisation was that the female body, an implicit and integral part of the *Whore* as sexual object, was also not discussed. Objectification of women and pathologising of the female body as wanting (in other words, without penis) has been one of the main topics since the birth of feminism. Juliet Mitchell (1975) gives a short and very useful history of how male psychoanalysts discussed the topic of female psychology during the interwar period, including for example, Freud and Abraham's letters to each other about the female castration complex, and that women's wish for sexual parity is to be seen as 'one of the manifestations of the female castration complex' (1975: 123. See pp. 121-131 for Mitchell's fascinating summary). (Mitchell says that 'Freud was inclined to makes quips against feminism', *ibid.*: 303. Other than Mitchell, also think Beauvoir, 1953; Cixous, 1976; Olivier, 1989; Rich, 2021/1976; more recently Hustvedt, 2016; Orbach, 2009; Rose, 2018, and many more). *There we were, a room full of feminists who did not dare talk about sex or the female body*. Olivier writes that 'my body had been the locus of norms and comparisons (as she grew up and before she had children); now my children were to become trump cards in the fierce competition into which my birth had pushed me' (1989: 71). My interpretation is that the 'norms and comparisons' Olivier writes about refer to the female versus the male body (where the male body is the classical psychoanalytic norm), as well as to comparison of our own female bodies

against those of other women (often objectified, pre-pregnancy female bodies as seen in the popular media and the gymnasium). She further writes, in criticising classical patriarchal psychoanalytic theory, that 'Freud decides that I as a woman shall want a child as replacement for the penis that I never had' (ibid.: 134). Is it possible that we, in our RPMs, replaced sex and body with children? What further interests me is the fact that the physical toll that pregnancy and breastfeeding take on the biological mother's body was largely absent from our conversations. Were the biological mothers unconsciously protecting the adoptive mothers in the group? And were we implicitly talking about the *Whore* (sex and the body) when gossiping about a new mother at school who has unnaturally blonde hair and wears revealing clothes, *because* we could not talk about ourselves?

So, this party that my daughter was at last weekend, this mother's got an *au pair* to drive the kids around and she's got four people that work in the house ... this woman is addicted to plastic surgery ... You know, everything is so ... the children's parties look like a catered [event] and ... it's in a sense perfect but so imperfect ... But I caught myself judging this woman. Although she's very nice and very kind and very friendly and very [generous]. But ... then Mae poked my stereotype because she also told me she's a mathematician (Jackie, RPM2). I mean, she works in finance, but she's got a PhD in math ... She's a mathematician. She's a very smart woman (Mae, ibid.). I felt so bad for judging, but she was, she was ... (Jackie, ibid.). You thought she was a ditz, and she works in finance and maybe she made all that money [herself] ... Oh, very rich, yes ... I do not judge her anymore for being ditzy, right? (Mae, ibid.).

Although not actively participating, as they did not know the woman under discussion, most of the participants seemed animated by the gossip, with a lot of laughter in

between. I later joined in the conversation as I knew the woman, and I felt so guilty afterwards that I devoted my third writing task to gossip and to my first visit to the abovementioned mother's house. An amalgamation of judgement, envy, projection, and punishment was playing itself out directly from the group unconscious. I wrote:

When I walk into her house, after seeing [all the] contemporary South African art ... I see her, the *Sarie* mom with the math PhD and all the art on my wish list and many helpers and perky boobs. I suddenly see her, and I know she is nothing of that stuff that I so ungenerously judge her by. She thanks me profusely for bringing my kids to play, asks whether I am really writing a PhD (as she heard I was), she could never do that, she reckons, Masters was as far as she would go. For a fleeting moment I wonder whether she knew about our gossip about her and about her non-PhD, setting things right. (Note to self: I judge people who gossip). And please only come back late afternoon, she continues, there would be lots for the kids to do and hers are famished for good company at the end of the holidays ... As I drive away, I feel the fool (Esther, WT3).

Note: *Sarie* is a South African women's magazine. *Sarie* mothers was throughout our conversations a shorthand reference to 'mainstream' mother-objects who seem to succeed in all their socially prescribed roles. They are encountered mostly on social media platforms, and sometimes at school or other real-life situations. They were either spoken about with envy or disapproval, but never without judgement.

As mentioned, overt opinions about the *Whore* as sexual being, however – whether it be envy or disgust, or anything in between – were mostly absent from our conversations. Once or twice both Simone and I mentioned the lover as one of our roles, with no reaction or reciprocity from the other participants. I believe that this

unconscious dynamic that played itself out in our group confirmed a general intolerance for the idea that a mother can also be interested in sex, and even sometimes more so than in her children. There seems to be little tolerance for an integrated sexual mother-subject who can love sex and who can also love her children. Beauvoir (1953: 284) writes:

It is easy to understand in actual experience the ambiguous personality of Aspasia or Mme de Pompadour. But if woman is depicted as the Praying Mantis, the Mandrake, the Demon, then it is most confusing to find in woman also the Muse, the Goddess Mother, Beatrice.

There seems to be a general fear of self- and social judgement and punishment of the sexual mother-subject, and a preference to objectifying the *Whore* as antithesis of the *Madonna*-object. I therefore, in celebration of her and her seemingly transgressive nature, wrote a little libidinally motivated story-poem to bring her into presence:

Reflective Journal (January 2024)

Saturday afternoon. Five o'clock. She had an entire afternoon to herself. This guilty pleasure has taken her twelve years to earn. The husband is playing golf (always). Her children are old enough now to keep themselves occupied for an entire Saturday afternoon. Quite an ordinary one, until she picked up Ovid's Ars Amatoria (trans., 2011: 663-688):

*Don't ask her age, or who was head of state
when she was born (let censors keep the date),
especially if her youth has passed, bloom fled
and now she plucks white hairs out of her head.
This is an age (or later) youths should know –
the field is fruitful; it's a field to sow.*

...

*What's more, they have more prudence in these things;
only they have technique experience brings.*

...

*They compensate with knowledge of the world
and take some trouble not to seem so old,
so you can choose one from a thousand ways
to have sex – more than any book displays.*

*They do not need provoking to their pleasure –
woman and man feel joy in equal measure.*

*I hate sex when it brings uneven joys:
that's why I don't like doing it with boys,
or girls who give out, thinking it a bind;
they're dry, and spinning wool is on their mind:
sex out of duty is unwelcome sport –
let no girl please me, feeling that she ought.*

She smiled, opened her computer, phoned her Lover, and they wrote:

She:

*Posing an invitation
in the presence of
flamingo (pink),
two mermaids,
and the full moon,
to penetrate.*

He:

*Accepting an invitation
in the presence of
flamingo (pink),
two mermaids,
and the full moon,*

to penetrate.

He:

*Posing an invitation
in the presence of
high tides,
blue hues,
an owl, lapwings, gulls,
quicksand,
to envaginate.*

She:

*Acknowledging all invitations and acceptances
they will be taken up
with ecstasy
again again
and more
it will be so.*

She:

*Laying down all politics and tactics
planted own-feet
under surface
in the rock of swimmers' cave
beyond high tide, low tide, full moon, flamingos, mermaids,
blue hues, owl, lapwings, the gulls,
firmly,
and with utmost gentleness,
taking
sucking
engulfing possessing fucking
at last:*

Envaginating!
the one
the hungry he.

(For Him, the Hungry Owl. For Her, the Amazon).

And so, mothers will be judged and punished – whether intrapsychically or socially – for the things they feel ambivalent about. For as long as mother and society do not understand and accept her ambivalences, she will stay in this double bind.

6. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I discussed four main themes arising from the data: namely maternal ambivalence (including four mother-types that I use in this study, to hold love and hate concurrently, and the importance for mothers to know themselves), political and sacral mythmaking in the mother story, to be a mother or an other (including the privilege of choice), and the idea that all roles compete for time, effort, and money. I concluded with a speculation on the reasons for the glaring absence of sex in the data.

In Chapter 7 I continue with the *Madonna-Whore* myth as started in Chapter 6. I pose a definition of social norms, what actual social norms are, and how society judges and punishes mothers who do not abide by social norms, as well as how mothers compare themselves to other mothers, and judge and punish themselves. I discuss my use of the term anecdote in this study and the importance of anecdote for normalisation. I conclude Chapter 7 with a discussion on social disobedience and transgression, and a definition of personal freedom through different avenues.

CHAPTER 7: OH, WHAT FREEDOM IN BEING FREE

1. INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 6 I discussed four themes arising from the data, namely maternal ambivalence, political and sacral mythmaking in the mother story, to be a mother or an other, and the idea that all roles compete for time, effort, and money. I concluded with a speculation on the reasons for the glaring absence of sex in the data.

Here, in the last data chapter, I continue with the *Madonna-Whore* myth, one of the major themes in my study. I continue with a definition of social norms with specific reference to our (RPs') experience, how society judges and punishes mothers who do not abide by social norms (including judgement and punishment by others, our mothers, our children), as well as how mothers compare themselves to other mothers, and judge and punish themselves. I discuss my use of anecdote in this study and the importance of anecdote for normalisation. I conclude with a discussion on social disobedience and transgression, and a definition of personal freedom and some avenues to get there.

2. MADONNA IS A MYTH

Perhaps we should be asking a slightly different question – not what a mother is or should be, but what version of motherhood might make it possible for a mother to listen to her child? For if Western culture in our times ... has repeatedly conspired to silence the inner life of the mother by laying on mothers the heaviest weight of its own impossible and most punishing ideals, and if the term 'mothers' is so often a trigger for a willed self-perfection that crushes women as mothers before anyone else, then how can they be expected to hear their children's cry...? (Rose, 2018: 120-121).

In his essay *The Worship of Women and the Worship of the Soul*, Jung speaks about 'the medieval element that presided over the birth of modern individualism' in Goethe's *Faust* (1989: 5). The poem begins with 'the worship of woman, which strengthened the man's soul very considerably as a psychological factor, since the worship of woman meant the worship of the soul' (ibid.). Jung further illustrates his point with Dante's *Divine Comedy* in which Dante exalts 'woman into the heavenly, mystical figure of the Mother of God', 'the personification of a purely psychological factor', detached from the object, without body (ibid.). Jung speaks about the *functional* importance of the Virgin Mother image (on which he built his theory of the soul-image of the *anima*), and how this image 'appears as a vessel of devotion, a source of wisdom and renewal', and how it affects man's conscious attitude (ibid.: 7). (I have been referring to Jung's Virgin Mother image as the *Madonna* throughout my thesis). Jung's interpretation of these texts against the backdrop of medieval Christianity is, in short, that man who could not afford to make himself guilty of the sin of impurity (through thoughts of woman as erotic object, or even by acknowledging woman as embodied, and therefore *potentially* erotic object), had to repress his erotic fantasies, and 'gradually pull his libido down into the unconscious' (ibid.: 9). Through this mechanism, woman reappears in divine form; this repressed erotic form activates the primordial image of goddess, Virgin Mother, or *Madonna* – Jung's archetypal soul-image of the *anima*. Freud would call this process of desexualisation, this repression in favour of a seemingly more virtuous sentiment, 'a kind of sublimation' (2018/1927: 22).

It is clear from the above that the *Madonna* myth, well, is a myth; an impossible position or role for any embodied subject-mother to follow, created by men, and has a specific function within a socio-religious context. Therefore, I pose that mothers are per definition judged, guilty of failure, and often punished by society as well as by themselves. The main concerns that I argue here are what social norms and expectations are, where they come from, and what the outcomes can be when mothers transgress.

3. SOCIAL NORMS AND EXPECTATIONS

3.1 Defining Social Norms

When we speak about disobedience and transgression, we speak about norms. Do we also speak about morality when we speak about social norms and expectations? The history and occurrence of social norms, morality, judgement, and punishment can be approached from many different angles (think Kant's moral philosophy, Russel's *Marriage and Morals*, 1961/1929; Nietzsche's *On The Genealogy of Morals*, 2013/1887; Foucault's extensive work on penal theories, for example *The Spectacle of The Scaffold*, 2008/1977, Gide's *The Immoralist*, 2000/1902), and over vast timespans (from the early Roman courts until today). These topics, each, comprise entire philosophical schools. For this thesis, I give a brief definition of social norms as well as my understanding from a contemporary, context-specific position. How does the notion that we live in societies dependent on norms and expectations for their functioning – and that judge and punish individuals accordingly – impact us RPs and the way we raise our children and experience motherhood? First, let me define what I am talking about.

Social norms can be defined as 'the unplanned result of individuals' interaction' (Bicchieri et al., 2023, para. 1). It 'ought to be understood as a kind of grammar of social interactions. Like a grammar, a system of norms specifies what is acceptable and what is not in a society or group' (ibid.). 'It is often observed as sets of recurrent behavioural patterns, not deliberately designed by a specific group of people, the context within which it comes to being is therefore important, and the difference between norms, moral codes, and legal rules are useful to know.' (ibid.). I referred to Friedan's (1963) concept of the feminine mystique in Chapter 6, and that women/mothers do not know exactly where social expectations come from. During the RPMs and WTs we spoke about the patriarchy, but in uncertain terms about who or what that is. May Thato made it explicit by asking: 'Who sets the standards? Because just now, from my experience, I've always battled with them, you know?' (RPM1).

Once (over time) sets of norms have been established and followed by a group of people (like mothers), expectations are created (by society, also over time) for group members to follow suit. The social function of norms is to hold individuals 'accountable to each other for the principles that they cover' (Bicchieri et al., 2023, para. 7). It places the individuals in positions where '[they] may praise and blame people for their behaviors and attitudes' (ibid.). The accountability function helps to create a further role for norms, which is 'imbuing practices with social meaning' (ibid.). The social meaning stems from an expectation between individuals to comply, that the norms represent shared values and sometimes a sense of shared identity. This shared identity was often experienced between us, and although I could not prospectively predict our perceived social cohesion, I know in retrospect that this was also one of my motivations for specifically inviting the participants that I did. I wanted like-minded mothers to confirm my experiences of mothering and motherhood (see Chapter 4).

Accountability distinguishes social norms from other social practices and other sets of desires (Bicchieri et al., 2023). But because a certain behaviour is practiced widely, and therefore seen as a social norm, it should not be inferred that it is morally sound (for example for a man to physically abuse his wife and children, or for a man to expect his wife to carry the entire mental load as her gendered parental role). Social pressure (in the case of gendered parental roles), and legislation (in the case of physical abuse of women and children) should help to increase social pressure to change such norms. (Mothers need to speak to each other if they wish to increase general social pressure on, for instance, issues like traditional gender roles in parenting. See my discussion on anecdote below, and Chapter 8 for the value of maternal conversation). This brings me back to the definition above, the importance of the context within which social norms come about, and that there is a difference between norms and moral codes. The context within which both examples above (gendered parental roles and domestic physical abuse) came about, was a deeply flawed system within which women and children were seen as subservient to and often the property of men. 'Norms often provide a solution to the problem of maintaining social order – and social order requires cooperation' (Bicchieri et al., 2023, para. 9). Mothers have over time and contexts been charmed, educated, coerced, manipulated, brainwashed, threatened

into cooperation. The motherhood system came about over time within a patriarchal agenda; there was no one specific meeting of men writing the rules (Saini, 2023). (See Chapter 5 for a short definition of the patriarchy).

3.2 Actual Social Norms and Expectations

Back to us RPs, what are the norms and expectations we believe we need to meet in order, at best, to be accepted as good enough mothers and, at worst, to avoid judgement and punishment? The norms in the contexts where most of us mother our children either refer to the mother title, in other words on *being* (how is a mother supposed to be?), or on mothering as a verb, in other words on *doing* (what roles does the mother need to fulfil?). (See Chapter 5 for definitions of mother and mothering).

To recap:

3.2.1 On Being

All women should want to have children (Beauvoir, 1953/1949; Letherby, 2017). All mothers should love their children unconditionally, always, or fake it (Rich, 2021/1976). All mothers should at least be good enough, always (Winnicott, 1964). All mothers should be ‘nurturing/waste-disposing “containers”’ (Raphael-Leff, 2009: 2). All mothers should know when and how their children need them, at exactly the right times and in the right ways. All mothers should be the *Madonna*.

The above was the general sense between us (RPs). Of significance is that I was not able to find many lived examples, or anecdotes, in the primary data substantiating this general feeling. I deduce from this shortage in the data that the RPMs were not a safe enough environment for such uncensored storytelling, and/or that many mothers have an intrapsychic image of society’s expectation of mothers, and that this expectation is generally communicated subtly rather than blatantly. I explore the latter idea below.

3.2.2 On Doing

All mothers should be school moms and have (or at least fake) an interest in their children's schools' activities. Jackie expressed her secret resentment of this role by explaining:

I wrote about that school friend of mine, who on [social media] posted how happy she was to be the class mom and to be baking. This is my biggest fucking anxiety, to be elected as a class mother. Normally we sort of rotate it because it's this thing that you have to do, and somebody needs to do ... You do it out of courtesy, because you know next year somebody else will take over the reins (RPM1).

Mae concurred: 'It's this horrible job you have to do, yes' (Mae, *ibid.*). I was not as subtle, and blatantly blurted out my disobedience to the system, as well as my self-judgement: 'I can say with tremendous pride and shame I've never been class mom' (Esther, *ibid.*). Nobody commented.

All mothers should have a (preferably professional) life of their own. Mothers who do not work, are dumb, and do not contribute to the family coffers in the capitalist dispensation where many single income households are not able to participate fully (Neustatter, 1989).

Mothers who study offer themselves a self-indulgent luxury unless their studies contribute directly to career development and potential income. Mae, the only other mother-student of the RPs, often spoke of her current study as being seen as less urgent/important than her mothering and general mental load – that she does not have a real job. I am often met with surprise, and even envy sometimes, when people hear that I am doing this study not for career purposes but for myself. I am not free from the guilt that stems from spending time and money on my study – therefore, on myself, because I *want* to and not because I *need* to.

All married mothers have sexual obligations to fulfil towards their husbands. Bertrand Russell wryly comments that ‘married women and prostitutes make their living by sexual charms’ (1961/1929: 25). Mothers should be – albeit secretly – their husbands’ *Whores*. As I discussed in Chapter 6, there is total silence in the data about sex – with husbands, wives, partners, and otherwise.

The other part of the *Whore* definition, as stated in Chapter 6, is the devalued housekeeper. All mothers should be in control of their families’ abodes (Friedan, 1963); mothers should carry the mental load. The data is strewn with anecdotal examples of this role.

Mothers should, of course, also be the friends, daughters, sisters and so on, of others.

All the above expectations make for good mothers. Knott states that ‘where a “good” mother exists, swathes of real-life “bad” mothers surely follow, whether in their own eyes, or in the gaze of institutions – the state, the law, the doctor, the social worker’, and, I wish to add, in the gaze of fathers, own mothers, and other mothers too (2019: 105).

4. SOCIAL JUDGEMENT AND PUNISHMENT

The story of social judgement and punishment started with the story of humanity itself, was highlighted in the Garden of Eden, reached one of many brutal peaks during the Middle Ages, changed focus after the French Revolution from the body as major target of punishment to ‘a discretion in the art of inflicting pain, a combination of more subtle, more subdued sufferings, deprived of their visible display’ (Foucault, 2008/1977: 8). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, ‘the gloomy festival of punishment was dying out’ (ibid.). The judgement process was no longer opaque, and punishment was no longer a spectacle, but rather became a more formalised legal or administrative process. Foucault continues in *The Spectacle of the Scaffold* (2008/1977), that social customs of the time, the nature of the crime committed, as well as the status of the perpetrator have been playing significant roles in creating a variety of punishments. The vastness of this history cannot be summarised in a mere paragraph and is beyond

the scope of my thesis. The Western, middleclass society that we (RPs) inhabit – even within patriarchy and its capitalist organisation – has come a long way. (See my positioning statement in Chapter 3 – I see myself as relatively free). But beyond the formal legal and administrative processes of Foucault’s writing lies an entire world of informal, below the surface, often subtle judgements and punishments. This is the world described by dozens of feminists, some of whom I have cited extensively throughout this thesis. This is the world where we went in our RPM conversations about mothering.

The mechanisms of social judgement and punishment of course still vary in nature and severity; some more formal or blatant, for example a mother’s loss of custody of her children, excommunication from a religious institution, or berating by the child’s school; others more informal or subtle, like not being invited to social events, being gossiped about or not trusted by other mothers, being pitied or objectified by other fathers. This list includes our judgement and punishment of, and/or being judged and punished by other mothers, our own mothers, and our children. Sometimes the multiple sources are intermingled, as will become clear in what follows. An example is in the I-poem below that I wrote from Cecilia’s WT3:

I Feel Judged – I Judge (Cecilia, WT3)

I feel judged by biological mothers

I judge mothers who complain endlessly about their children

I find annoying

I pass judgement.

I feel judged by mothers when...

I respond

I judge them with my gaze.

I judge mothers who let their little ones...

I judge mothers who let their children...

I also judge mothers who...

I judge the parent who...

I judge other women.

I tend to judge fathers less, even though

I know better

I sent my partner out to buy the diapers and formula

I knew he would be judged less for being the helpless parent.

I judge the fathers at my daughter's school

I see it in who does the dropping off and picking up

I judge fathers who...

I know that a mother would never do the same.

I judge myself on my parenting skills

I judge my patience, my tone, my irritability

I don't think my daughter knows how much

I judge myself.

I feel judged by my daughter when

I do something that hurts her

I see it in her eyes.

I feel judged by my partner for my mothering

I judge his fathering.

I am less strict.

I am judged by Black women for adopting a Black baby.

I am judged by Indian women for adopting a Black baby.

I am judged by White women for adopting a Black baby.

I received judgement

*I did not expect, when
I announced my plan to adopt.
I will take the case of [Lily],
I judged [Lily].*

*I always thought judgement between women would lessen with age.
I judge my three sisters for their lack of interest in my daughter.
I live so far away, but
I still find it upsetting.*

*I am grateful for my daughter's side of the family
I pass less judgement on them.*

*I judged my parents far less, after
I became a parent myself.
I am astounded by all their small acts of love and care
I judge my father less for his absent presence.*

4.1 Other Mothers

In a discussion on virtue and judgement, Rose states that ‘most of those who judge have never been tested or tried’ (2023: 126). But some have. There are many examples in the data of RPs acknowledging our judgement of other mothers. I believe that judgement is a common form of projection-as-defence-mechanism against our own sense of failure. I find an almost caricature-like example in Knott’s study of high-society Victorian maternal letters on breastfeeding. One mother wrote to another, gossiping about a third: ‘She has a good, sweet babe, but she is a helpless Mother, she cannot suckle it, and knows very little about the care of children ... I hope you will see *my* little treasure next autumn, and his *devoted* mother’ (2019: 143. Italics in the original). I believe that a lack of boundaries makes the judgement between me and other mothers interchangeable. Whether I judge, or I am being judged, are flipsides of the same dynamic. I see that mothers who have clear boundaries do not project their shit and shadows onto others as readily as mothers who find it difficult to divorce their

own material from that of others. They are more able to claim what belongs to them, acknowledge it, and work with it. Simone alludes to the idea that judgement of other mothers is a crude version of discernment between what we find acceptable in mothering, and what not:

I think something really important around judging, feeling judged ... has got to do with boundaries... You say this is ... the line. Naming the line, this is what I want ... that is what I don't want ... and that's discernment. So, discernment definitely is a higher level or more evolved form of ... judgment. Because everything is not perfect, everything is not perfectly good. You know, we're saying it's messy. We're saying we make mistakes (RPM3).

During the same conversation, Mae contemplates her own judgement of others, often as impulsive, unthinking behaviour:

I also judge people a lot of the time, also just unfairly, because I don't know the background, and it's easy to just say what you're doing looks shit to me and you're crap, that you're bad. And there's a kind of emptiness to it. Because most of the time, I won't really think about it again (Mae, *ibid.*).

Two meetings before, she expressed the intensity with which she receives the judgement of other mothers:

I hated going onto [the local shopping strip] with my babies and a pram and being told how they need four more blankets. It used to irritate the shit out of me that all these women knew better than ... me (*ibid.*, RPM1).

Forward again, in WT3 Mae struggled through her self-judgement and comparison against other mothers as well the internalised image of her own mother-identity and mothering. Read together, these three excerpts are a clear example of the intrapsychic judgement, projected judgement, and the uncertainty in many mothers about who/what/how we are supposed to be. Herewith the I-poem I wrote:

I am Seeking Belonging (Mae, WT3)

I'm thinking about this a lot.

I find a sense of belonging(?)

I am constantly measuring my sense of self against others

I am seeking (belonging)

(I define who I am) in terms of (judgement)

(I define who I am not) in terms of (judgement)

I am judging as 'not' and

I push that away and reject that.

I desperately seek that and draw it towards me, aspire.

I am not and have not... As if what

I think is real.

I think, therefore I am. Therefore, it is.

I'm part of a counselling group.

When in my life do I pretend? When

I'm not even conscious of who I'm being.

I try to control

I think we all have this or do this.

I get older

I'm still so aware of those...

I aspire to be more like...

I want to be (like)...

(I) want to feel like...

I try to raise kids who are better than me.

I don't really want to touch the rain spider

I don't want my kids to even get the idea that the rain spider is scary

I pretend to be fascinated by its beauty and size

I think anyone can understand that

I am a normal person with fears too

(I am) doing them a disservice in pretending not to be scared.

I judge myself.

I'm calm, wise mommy, protector of creatures great and small,

I am terrified mommy who needs protection from creatures.

I dunno.

I'm better off just not pretending

I guess there's another way:

I'm a bit scared of rain spiders, but

I don't want to hurt them.

SHE

That rational, non-judging mommy exists mostly only in my head.

She is the good and whole mommy

She appears when I am sitting calmly

I need this mommy to be quicker on the uptake!

ME

I'm not a Buddhist

I don't hate myself either

I judge myself, for sure.

I hold myself accountable. Never mind all the shit

I don't see

I don't even want to go there

I want my kids to know.

I think, therefore

I am.

I think of myself, therefore

I am.

I think of others, therefore

I am.

Wacquant and Deyanov speak about 'symbolic violence' in gender relations, and with a focus on women's judgement of other women (cited by Scherer & Norman, 2023: 5). Although working class women suffer most under this gendered judgement, 'often positioned as "doing it wrong" or "getting it wrong" both by women within, and outside their own social group' (ibid.). Scherer and Norman did not feel exempt from this attack on their mothering, despite their privileged social positions (in their case, in response to reading parenting books on sleep).

Veronica responded to Mae's confession, steering away from the symbolic violence towards other mothers:

It doesn't impact you. I mean, you always know when you see a mother in a supermarket, and the child is having a meltdown, that you're either gonna think, poor mother, or, oh God, that mother's just not got it together, or thank God it's not me. (Laughter in the group). But you walk away, and you know, I don't know anything about this situation (Veronica, RPM1).

Walking away and knowing that I don't know anything about the situation *is* the divorce of my material from the other mother's. This is the boundary-setting, the clear

knowledge of what belongs to me and what not, and therefore the undoing of the symbolic violence. I was wondering about the laughter around the table in response to Veronica's supermarket sketch. Was the laughter an acknowledgement of a deep identification by the group? *Thank God it's not me*; a projection, because sometimes it is me, but at least not this time.

I discussed gossip extensively in Chapter 6. I want to add to the discussion that gossip is a form of self-judgement, and therefore a projected judgement onto others. The 'Sarie magazine mothers' (see Chapter 6) live within the patriarchal system and some of us judge them for that. We sometimes believe we are superior to them because we do not live by those norms. But how much do they judge us back for transgressing the same norms? I was struggling for some time after that fact to make sense of my own need to gossip about another school mom during RPM2. I devoted WT2 to it, and brought it up again (maybe trying to explain myself and come clean?) during RPM3:

In the first conversation I think we also spoke about the *Sarie* moms. Mothers who seem to have everything under control and everything looks good from the outside, and we don't get it right. And my feeling is that I judge some of those people because I feel insufficient as a mother ... So, when I think about gossip, and judging people, and I think about this woman that I wrote about ... and the gossip is about her person. So, there's different types of judgment, I guess; judging someone as a person or the thing that someone does. For instance, giving a child loads of sugar on the aeroplane is ... not wise ... but to ... judge people who have become stereotypes in my mind ... I think that has more to do with my character and my sense of self, and the things in me that I despise and so vehemently oppose, and therefore I see it in other people. I think [gossip] is [an] incredibly toxic thing

to do ... And the reflection on me (the gossip) is exceptionally bad. Not on that woman, really (Esther, RPM3).

4.2 Our Own Mothers (Take I)

We do not need to claim sole responsibility for our shortcomings as mothers. We have been raised and raise our children in rhizome-like, tangle-of-spaghetti-like complex ecosystems; a 'species as a collective brain' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995: 212; Rinaldi, 2021), where linear understanding and blame leads back to projection onto the other, and a lack of responsibility for own material. (See Chapter 2 for a discussion on Reggio and complexity theory). We sometimes must judge those who brought us into the world and those who raised us, those who taught us how to mother – partly to exempt ourselves from a sense of total failure, but also to see ourselves within a more reality-based context. Linear thinking leads to mother guilt (Lazarre, 1976). As mentioned before, May Thato wondered whether her mother reached the so-called standards of mothering: 'Was I mothered or not mothered, you know, I'm asking because of my profession, because I also do a lot of parenting work' (RPM1). She later (in RPM3) expressed the judgement she felt towards her own mother during a recent visit to her home-country:

In April when I was in Zimbabwe, this (RP) group was very much in my mind, because I was with my mother. And I was looking at her, the way she mothers her grandchildren ... and it was like looking at her from some distance. Oh, this is how she mothers. I could see the gentleness in her approach with the children and I was actually very angry ... Some of the things I've seen that she tolerates that I would not tolerate. I was very judgmental' (May Thato, RPM3).

'Had she become softer over the years?' Veronica asked her (ibid.). May Thato responded: 'I don't know, I don't know, she didn't raise me' (ibid.).

4.3 Our Own Mothers (Take II)

The flipside is seen in many theoretical (e.g. Chodorow, 1978) and anecdotal (e.g. Lazarre, 1976) writings about mothers who feel judged and punished by their own mothers and mothers-in-law for the way in which they raise their children. Simone poses a clear example in the opening paragraph of her WT3, and an I-poem I wrote from the rest of it:

*The most recent verdict comes from my mother's mouth about a week ago
as we sat around the dinner table in the company of three of my friends:
'Simone's husband is raising [her 16-year old son]', she declares out of the
blue. The impact is immediate. Part of me immediately tests the truth of that
comment and I must admit:*

I'll Try Again Tomorrow (Simone, WT3)

I can continue.

I do feel guilty for not being as present as

I 'should be.'

I've been taking a lot of time for myself.

I am spending a lot of time in [the coastal town where my mother lives].

I need the proximity of ocean and mountain,

I am in [the coastal town where my mother lives].

I take a deep breath and try to respond as an adult

I start ...

*I remember those words,
I remember the anger I felt,
I remember the doubt I felt.*

*I remember the first time I became aware of how strong the internalised judgement is.
I was reprimanding (my son) ... when
I stopped.
I just gave up.
I thought about the incident.
(I am following) whose 'rules'?
(I am following) whose script?
I stood up with new resolve. To be more mindful when
I find myself on autopilot.*

*I do not believe in the notion of perfection,
I want to believe that most of us try our best most of the time.
I've been surrounded with women who resemble a 'good' mother.
I am not that mother.*

*I am the mother who organises a weekly family breakfast in the river.
I am the mother who tells her son that sticks can talk.
I am the mother who used to experience the same physical symptoms as my son when
he got ill or injured.
I am the one who knows in every fibre of her being that she loves deeply and learns
more about love daily.*

*I am the mother who can be judged and do judge herself daily
I cannot manage to fulfil
I am the mother who fails daily
I am the mother who judges daily
I am the mother who goes to bed saying:
I'll try again tomorrow.*

4.4 Our Children

Rose presents the idea that the expectation on mothers to be perfect is closely related to the so-called 'overinvested' or 'narcissistic' mother's 'drive to perfection' (2018: 77). This mother, my study's *Madonna* mother-type, sees a world that is supposed to be flawless in her child. Rose states that if you are demanding of mothers to be perfect, 'why wouldn't they pass that impossible demand on to their child?' (ibid.). She warns against the dangerous belief in 'purity or perfection' of yourself, your child, or anyone else (ibid.: 130). It is a 'delusion', says Rose, that 'moral purity and perfection are possessions, and that imperfection is shameful', and that violence is not part of everybody (ibid.: 131). She advocates for the acknowledgement of human imperfection as part of our understanding of each other, and that this understanding 'might just help prevent the spread of devastation as it travels with such indecent haste across our futures' (ibid.). Rose is asking for integration as seen in my study's *Integrated Ambivalent Mother*. Judging their children for not being or doing what they envisioned for them, is something my most gutsy patients admit doing in the intimate confidentiality of the practice room. I did not find much of that in the data gathered for this study. Does it just feel too impossibly harsh to acknowledge that we sometimes feel our maternal failures *are actually our children*? It seems easier to focus on ourselves as failures (intrapsychic judgement) rather than on our children as the failed products of our hands? What I did find was Tryfina and May Thato, the other two psychotherapists in the group and the only two participants with adult children, as well as Nadine engaging this painful reality of judging, and being judged by, their children. Most (if not all) mothers surely think and feel this from time to time? Some mothers are able to acknowledge and integrate this ambivalence, and so they grow into *Integrated Ambivalent Mothers*. Other mothers are not able to, and they stay the *Anguished Ambivalent Mother*, the *Madonna*, or the *Whore* (unable to integrate love and hate for their children into parts of a healthy self). Early in RPM1 Tryfina disclaimed that she is guilty. It was not clear whether she meant guilty by her own judgement or that of her children. (As seen above, maybe it is often the same thing):

I'm one of those mothers whose children spend years in therapy talking about their mother. It's like that sort of thing, you know, they are going to spend years in therapy talking about their mom (Tryfina, RPM1).

May Thato reflected on her own judgement of her son and daughter-in-law who are new, first-time parents, and wondered how she can express her disapproval of their parenting in a gentle way:

I also feel judgmental ... I've got a grandson of four months old, and when he cries, people (with *people*, did she mean her son and daughter-in-law?) freak out and they put the dummy in the mouth. Even when he just wakes up, even when he's quiet, whereas I, I ... (did she want to say: I would not do it?). But put the dummy in there, silence him. But for me, and I say, you might want to take it out. But I feel I really will be a judge. I must say I do. Because I feel as if there is a lost opportunity. But then again, I'm speaking as somebody who works with moms and babies ... and also as a person that comes from those communities where we didn't have dummies ... As soon as the baby cries [you put in the dummy], because it's embarrassing to the mother when the baby is crying. That's what it's about. He is speaking. So, this morning, I thought, I will be gentle [in asking and/or suggesting], I'll just find out. Just let him be, this is a quiet baby, but when he wakes up and he wants his feed, he will cry for his mommy, he actually throws away the dummy, because he wants mommy's breast (May Thato, RPM2).

I wrote the poem below, not using the I-poetry formula as it was not indicated for Nadine's third person writing of this task):

The Mothers – The Children (Nadine, WT3)

The MOTHERS walk into the assembly.

*The MOTHERS will speak first,
they will describe their experiences
they will give an account.*

THE CHILDREN will have the chance to ask questions, respond and tell their stories.

THE MOTHERS prepare to speak but the atmosphere quickly changes.

THE CHILDREN'S rage proves impossible to contain.

*The CHILDREN'S faces crease,
their eyes darken.*

All the CHILDREN start talking at once.

Why didn't you see me?

Why did you abandon me?

Why didn't you show me?

Why did you hurt me?

Why didn't you take care of me?

Why do you make me feel ashamed?

Why didn't you let me find my own way?

Why do you try to control everything?

Why couldn't you love me?

Why did you put so much pressure on me?

Why weren't you there for me?

Why did you criticise me?

Why did you make me responsible for your happiness?

*The CHILDREN'S judgement rises to meet
the MOTHERS' grief, incomprehension, shame.*

*The shame of the MOTHERS whose failure is already partly known,
and always expected.*

The shame of the MOTHERS reinforced by all the countless stories:

bad MOTHERS,

cruel MOTHERS,

suffocating MOTHERS,

unavailable MOTHERS,

MOTHERS who don't love,

MOTHERS who run away,

chaotic MOTHERS,

disorganised MOTHERS,

drunk MOTHERS,

pious MOTHERS,

perfectionist MOTHERS,

withholding MOTHERS,

MOTHERS who wrong their children,

MOTHERS who cause untold unwitting or intentional damage;

damage that can't be undone and which finds no respite.

Equally shaming stories of heroic MOTHERS:

MOTHERS who sacrificed themselves to educate their CHILDREN,

*MOTHERS who put everything aside so that their CHILDREN'S lives could be better
than theirs.*

What is wrong with these MOTHERS?

(How could they have done such terrible things?)

These are very bad MOTHERS.

They are very bad women. (So selfish! Just thinking of their own pleasure).

MOTHERS who are running around,

MOTHERS not staying at home,

MOTHERS distracted by their work,

MOTHERS going to parties,

*MOTHERS going to meetings,
MOTHERS going to sleep.*

MOTHER: a fearful antagonist who was also desperately desired.

The MOTHERS know their failures:

The MOTHERS expected to fail even before they began.

The MOTHERS have nothing to answer this rage.

THE MOTHERS feel it is true,

but

THE MOTHERS also know that parts of the story are missing.

Look at those poor CHILDREN.

Where are the MOTHERS?

*(The fathers' attempts to take care of children elicit pity and admiration),
the absent MOTHERS are delinquent and damned.*

The MOTHERS remember scenes of unbearable frustration, exhaustion, loneliness:

the invasion of space,

the possession of the body,

the endless demands for attention,

the relentless negotiations and fruitless, illogical arguments,

the constant noise and the terrible, terrible sound of crying,

the everyday tedium,

the ticking clock, and

the longing to be alone.

The licence the CHILDREN feel to take everything that is yours:

to brush your hair even if it hurts,

to smear your lipstick until the tip breaks off,

to lose your bracelet in the park, or

to eat all the bread.

*The CHILDREN'S accidents:
the spilt milk on the carpet,
the holes cut into dresses by wayward scissors,
the koki pen scribble on the sheets.*

The MOTHERS try to articulate a deeper state of

feeling

utterly

overwhelmed, emptied out, unsupported.

The MOTHERS' feelings of constant anxiety:

to do the right thing,

that they would fail,

about money.

Trying to be MOTHERS while also dealing with loss.

The social judgement is in tune with the CHILDREN'S rage:

the expectations placed on the women are non-negotiable and

the evidence of suffering at their hands irrefutable.

The MOTHERS' concerns sound trivial and small.

The MOTHERS' bodies seem to fold over.

The MOTHERS' legs feel leaden,

their arms go slack.

Faulted, at fault,

knowing and not knowing.

They have no more words and nothing to explain.

This poem was a punch in my stomach. Thankfully I also found an example of Veronica distinguishing between her child's occasional cruel behaviour and her overall kind character; a clear distinction between behaviour (*doing wrong*) and the self (*being bad*):

I've seen my own child be cruel. And I've pointed it out to her and I've said, now, that was a cruel thing to do, what you did was not kind. So, let's talk about it. And you want to try not to do that again, let's acknowledge it. And my child's not a sociopath, she's just occasionally cruel because she's a human being. And what I try to teach her is to be less of that and more kind to people. That's how you want them to be to you. So, if my wonderful, beautiful child is occasionally cruel, and maybe because I've occasionally been cruel to her, she's probably learned that. But then I learned that. Back to back to back to back to where millions of human beings first started (Veronica, RPM3).

Simone was upset by the harsh judgement and shame by her mother in front of her new friends (see previous section). Her immediate reaction, that she did not express, was:

Fuck you, let me tell you where you were [when we were young]. Who raised us? Who cooked for us? It really, really irked me, and I sat with it, and partly because I feel guilty that I'm actually taking the time for other things. And a friend of mine who's a gender activist said, But why? Why should you be upset if somebody says that? Because of course I am upset. Because I know that tone of voice and the judgment in it. That's how deeply ingrained this thing is, all these things are, even though the times have

changed. And then my husband, my beautiful man, in a very soft and gentle way said yes, well, I actually, it's interesting that your mother brought this up, I have actually been wanting to talk to you about this (RPM3).

After her mother's remark and her husband's confirmation she decided to ask her son directly – the one seemingly raised by his father alone, 'the only one who did not make me feel judged' (ibid.). This is what she heard from him: 'Mom, I'm so proud of you. You are doing so many things ... I think when I'm older, I want a full life like that' (ibid.).

4.5 Being and Doing, You and Me, in a Muddle

What happens when *being* and *doing* get muddled up? In short: you make a mistake/transgress a norm/disobey a rule, society frowns upon what you do, you internalise the frown, and your super-ego punishes you for not being good enough. Examples abound where being and doing get mixed up in mothers' responses to self-help parenting guidebooks and social media feeds. We typically read them, follow the seemingly easy steps, and judge ourselves for not getting it right. Scherer and Norman (2023) wrote an auto/biographical paper with rich embodied experiences of attempted sleep training. If I do the thing according to the book and I do not get the predicted (or prescribed) outcomes, it could only mean, uncritically, that there must be something wrong with me, the mother. But the distinction between a person and their behaviour is often opaque, and it is so that, because of the opaqueness, social as well as intrapsychic judgement and punishment are thus often aimed at the self and not the self's imperfect behaviour. We had many conversations about this in our RPMs, that we are inherently not good enough because of our mistakes and transgressions. How is it possible, we often argued, to receive social feedback on our behaviour without internalising it as character flaws? 'When is a judgement a judgement?' Jackie asked during RPM3. 'When you think less of the person for that thing that they do with their child and therefore they must be deficient?' (ibid.). In response, Veronica gave an example from her own family:

Yes. I never thought my sister was deficient. I thought that she was just bad at that one thing. And she's the kind of person who you could say to: I think you're bad at that thing. And she'll say: Yes, you're probably right, without feeling, well, I must be a bad person. Because that's not what I'm saying, I'm not saying she was a bad person. You seem to be not so good at that and that's okay (ibid.).

Simone replied to Veronica in surrendering to her own human imperfection. What follows is an excerpt from a longer dialogue between them:

Simone: So, there's something around this idea of perfection, that human striving for perfection. I think there's a few careers where you can get close to perfection, I don't think mothering is one of them. We're using the same type of thinking for very different [roles].

Veronica: You can be an excellent cellist and occasionally you make a mistake. You are consciously attempting to chase those practices, keep getting better, do it over and over, until I've got it right. Perfection.

Simone: There's something about perfection, where it's possible and where it's not. You're the closest to messy in a family, and it's how it always is.

Veronica: It is. Life is messy and we're implicated in it all the time.

Simone: And I think I'm gonna walk away here being a little bit more okay to judge.

Veronica: I think you can judge and still be kind. Judging is a function of your being an intelligent human being; you see something that is not the way you do it, and you judge it because you're comparing what you do with what someone else does, but you're not going to walk up to someone and say, you stupid person. No, we have the ability to judge and the ability to be diplomatic.

Simone: So, actually, when I think about it, it is very seldom ... that I express my judgement to people outside except when I'm defending myself (RPM3).

If perfection in mothering is impossible, as we have established it is, why then do so many mothers still feel so much of the social and intrapsychic pressure to be perfect mothers? Because of the shortage of anecdotal data from our RPMs, and yet an acute sense of social judgement amongst us, I am wondering how much of our scripts about our failing as mothers are intrapsychic but projected onto society, or whether the social judgements and punishments are sometimes so subtle that we are unable to tell the stories. Judgement of oneself and of others are often not easy to separate because of our constant use of the two psychoanalytic defence mechanisms projection and projective identification (See Ogden, 1979, for a discussion on projective identification). Psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden states that projective identification, when used as *a defence mechanism*, helps to create psychological distance from undesired, and often frightening, parts of ourselves (1979). Interestingly, when projective identification is used as *a mode of communication*, it is a process in which we place our own feelings into another person, and whereby we create a feeling of being understood by or 'of being at one with the other person' (ibid.: 362). I believe that this mode of communication was used almost constantly during our RPMs. We often, as the data shows, felt truly understood by at least one of the other mothers

around the table. We also often compared ourselves to each other and to other mothers outside the study, which often lead to self-judgement and punishment.

5. INTRAPSYCHIC JUDGEMENT AND PUNISHMENT

5.1 Comparison: I am Alone

Brutal honesty – uncensored truth-talking about the shadow sides of mothering – is limited, claims Lazarre in her memoir (1976). Why is her baby not contented? she asks herself repeatedly, and suddenly wonders whether it is because too many other mothers are dishonest when talking about their happy babies. During our RPMs we often spoke about the ways in which other mothers present themselves to the world. Some of those mothers are the ones at school and on the local shopping strip (see above), but too frequently they are the ones parading on social media platforms, and the ones who write the parenting manuals that lead to uncertainty and self-judgement (Knott, 2019; Scherer & Norman, 2023). They are mothers who curate their lives to look ordinary and easy and clean, and who choose names like *Just-a-Mama* to create the feeling that any mother should be able to relate to her. What are we *doing* by comparing ourselves to people who do not even exist in reality? Mae, who is using social media as primary data source for her current mothering study, said:

These [social media] moms, the *momfluencers* can make a living out of being a mom ... [They believe they are] doing it for the greater good, because [they're] supporting all these other moms who need the help. Who need to know where to get plain coloured long sleeve tracksuit tops, or who need to know how to make a hat for hat day in [just] half an hour with your digital laser cutter ... She's Just-a-Mama, that's her name. And it's that whole thing of relatability, it's so important, you know, Just-a-Mama (RPM1).

Although we know this has nothing to do with real-life mothering, some of us still feel the pressure to perform against the impossible goals set by seemingly normal run-of-the-mill mothers. To fail against a seemingly normal mother's success is a dismal failure. Jackie believes that, even in our knowing what this is, 'it still sets some expectations' (RPM1):

I don't have any expectations, because even if I wanted to be like that, I just cannot ... I also don't want to be that kind of mother with Mr. Perfect. I mean, I find my husband annoying [however much] percent of the time, I really want him to build this fucking man cave, but I still love him. I mean that Mr. Perfect thing eeks me because I don't believe her for one, but other people might (Jackie, RPM1).

In a previous conversation Nadine reminded Mae of speaking about little girls 'being socialised to compete or to compare, like the thing with women, we are socialised to be in competition with other women' (RPM2). Mae responded by reflecting on her own daughter's behaviour:

I hear, I see it in my three-and-a-half-year-old daughter who sees other little girls at nursery school. There's something competitive, they're looking at each other's shoes, lunchboxes. And my son never, I mean, he's also just a different personality. I don't know if there's something socialised about the way girls have stuff, or they're already measuring their worth according to what they have or how they look. And then, I mean, I do that all the time. I imagine all these people to have lives that look a certain way and then I think, what is wrong with my life? Like, is there something wrong with it? It's

just an inbuilt competitive something ... that I must compare myself to every other mother, every other woman (Mae, RPM2).

A humorous moment followed when Veronica asked: 'I wonder whether stay-at-home dads compete with other stay-at-home dads?' and Jackie answered: 'There are not many to compete with' (RPM2).

In the I-poem below that I wrote from Nadine's WT2, she articulates her judgement of another mother and child that she encountered in the park, her introspection and acknowledgement that she sometimes does right by her own child, her intrapsychic judgement and acceptance that her mothering journey will take her through ebbs and flows, and that it is alright. (I used the regular formula to write the I-poem, but I rephrased from *we, one, mothers* into the first-person singular):

I Know I am Doing What I Can (Nadine, WT2)

I don't answer

I watch this man in his armchair

I recall all the frustrations

I stare into space

I can barely meet his eyes

I button my lips

I walk with a mother and her son

I watch as his face begins to light up

I roll my eyes

I pat myself on the back for not being a helicopter parent

I say, 'How ridiculous to be so controlling!'

I say, 'She's ruining his life!'

I know the outrage

I feel

I suspect that I am being judged as parent or, even worse, mother

I think

I learned fairly quickly about the golden rule of parenting

I am a refugee from 'bad' parenting

I seem to have managed okay. Maybe

I have made the stakes too high. Maybe

I have catastrophised.

I am haunted by the fear of damaging a child

I am haunted by the fear

I might already have set the scene for a sorry repetition.

I am wondering why:

I still feel the need to draw the line

I still feel the need to think about and measure myself against other people

I still need to affirm my own choices

I want to give particular values and goals importance

I want to be in the right

I am working through my own experience of being mothered

I have fierce judgement reactions: pain or difficulty.

I, mother, feel extreme pressure to perform

I realised the sheer complexity of the task of being a mother only later

I realised the nature of my own energy levels, financial constraints, lack of sleep.

I know how hard it is to make the best – or I suppose the 'good enough' – choices

I know that I am doing what I can

I know that the odds are against me

I must know that this is also true of everyone else.

I've ended up with more questions than answers

I sit here. Perhaps

I also just need to learn to be open to criticism!

5.2 Anecdote: I am Not Alone

It is in the nature of qualitative auto/biographical research to enable the telling of anecdotes – tales or sketches of ordinary life. I see anecdotes as an important part of normalising our own struggles and shortcomings, and I therefore treat them in my study as valuable data. I quoted Lazarre (1976) in the section above, and agree that mothers' honest, uncensored truth-talking about lived experiences can help fend off judgement against impossible expectations. I extrapolate on this below.

Judgement, per definition, includes comparison; I/an other is compared to me/an other, and one is constructed in my own mind, and/or in society, as superior to the other. There must be a problem with her marriage or herself if a woman 'did not feel this mysterious fulfilment waxing the kitchen floor', writes Friedan of American women in the 1950's and 1960's (1963: 17). She thought that other women were satisfied with their lives because they did not speak about their shameful dissatisfactions. It is important for mothers to listen to anecdotes for a few reasons. As discussed, intrapsychic judgement and punishment is often due to unrealistic or illogical comparison. Anecdotes help mothers to know what is normal, whether they need to seek help in their mothering, that they are not alone. As I have also discussed before, women/mothers are often gaslit by the patriarchal system. A second reason for reading anecdotes is that anecdotes written by other mothers of similar age, socio-economic stance, and/or context could be a valuable part of reality checks. Comparisons between me and curated social media mothers or people from socio-economic stances out of my reach, do not serve me or my children. Yet, an awareness of inequality across social divides could help instigate social action and eventual change. Anecdotes therefore also play a significant role in individual maternal- as well as in systemic change. One of the contributions I wish to make with my study is exactly that. A further reason for anecdotes being significant, historian Knott (2019) explains, is because mothers' stories have in the past not been important enough to be written up in history books. I discussed (in Chapter 6) the ambivalence that mothers sometimes experience in having to choose one role over another; how much time, effort, and money to invest into which roles is difficult to know (Rich, 2021/1976). Anecdotes can help disarm this kind of often-debilitating intrapsychic maternal

judgement and punishment. In other words, anecdotes can help mothers to give themselves permission. Knott explains that when mothers read contemporary anecdotes, the 'shoulds' and 'musts' of motherhood disappear (2019: 171). As told earlier in this thesis, I will forever recall the intensity of my guilt for removing myself physically for the first time from my eldest child when I had to go to my office for a few minutes when she was a few days old. I have benefitted tremendously in the mothering of my own children, as well as in doing this study, from women who admit similar experiences in their writings; women who write down anecdotes. Some of the women who write in anecdotes I used as reference material for this thesis, others I have not mentioned here, but have nonetheless over time become part of the patina of my maternal identity. A few of them are Lisa Baraitser, Rachel Cusk, Adrienne Rich, Siri Hustvedt, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Annie Ernaux, Jeanette Winterson, and Angela Garbes.

I was delighted to read the anecdote below, and immediately thought of my own experience in hospital – after an emergency caesarean with my first child – of being told by the paediatrician to throw the pile of books away (see my poem in Chapter 3). *I am not alone*. I know this not because I am being told so by theorists or professionals that I am normal, but because another mother's story sounded like mine. Norman tells of her experience:

As a proud pregnant mother, I recall receiving and buying several parenting books. I gorged through the advice and relished in the anticipation of holding my baby and all being well, almost a dreamlike picture to visualise. This was deep and emotionally-led reading, linked with a sense of 'being' a mother and 'doing' mothering in endorsed ways laid out by the books. It was not until I was in the delivery room having an emergency caesarean that I had the sudden realisation I had not read anything about this. The

shock and the feeling of helplessness was terrifying and after returning home this feeling remained (Scherer & Norman, 2023: 11).

Another delightful anecdote was this one told by Tryfina during our RPM1. She is softspoken, has a twinkle in her eye, and makes me want to be older and wiser than I am, and be able to laugh at myself the way she sometimes does:

The two youngest ones did this to me: They used to fight, and they used to fight in the morning, you know, when you're trying to get people dressed and go to school, and that sort of thing. And the one morning I really flipped. I was half dressed but I ran down the passage to their room. And I don't know what gave them the biggest fright, you know, me running down the passage with boobs flopping around, or, that kind of thing, like, you know, like really grabbing them, like, I'm gonna kill you if you don't stop right now. I think it was good for them to actually see me flip. Because it was years later, not so long ago, when something happened, and when I say not long ago, I mean, a couple of years ago, they were standing in the kitchen not too far apart. And yes, something happened, and I was angry, actually. And the youngest one said to the other one, you are actually standing too close to her. You are standing too close to her because you don't know when she's going to strike. If I were you, I would stand a bit further. That brought me to my senses (Tryfina, RPM1).

Some anecdotes are more difficult and less delightful to hear, like Mae's story below in which she acknowledges not being a good enough mother at times; not because of lunchboxes or other surface-level habits, but because she sometimes cannot offer

herself to her children in the way she knows they need her. I am grateful to the other RPs for sharing these deeply painful stories with which I, and I dare say most mothers, identify – albeit in secret:

Then I go and sit down [with my children in the art class]. Three minutes later I see they're looking around, asking ... not even my kids, other kids, can I have the purple, please? No one, can you hear me? I can't help myself. I get up and I'm getting the purple, you know, and I must be so irritating to this poor [art teacher] who is doing a great job here and I'm so thankful to her. I'd rather have dropped my kids and gone. I thought I would be able to, but every time I leave the room, [my son] cries. That's what's hard for me. And the hard judgement is also like that. It's okay when it's stuff that I've had time to think about, you know, and weigh up. But then when things are hard, and he's having tantrums every day, and I lose it, and I shout at him, and I pick him up roughly and I want to throw him out the window, and I know everything that I'm doing, I've watched how wrong it is as it's going wrong, and then I'm doing it anyway. I've got no control, right? Like eating the whole chocolate cake. I just cannot *not*, and I watch it happening. And I feel ... I go to bed at night and all I can say is, I'm going to be better tomorrow, tomorrow will be better, tomorrow, I'll be better tomorrow ... And then I go and sit in therapy and cry it out and think about the ways in which I'm triggered. But the truth of the matter is that the next time, it's usually when there's been a series of bad days, I may be able to be patient once or twice, but I'm gonna go again. And that judgment ... what this is ... never mind baking ... and the no screen time. ... This is not the

reading, arty, pottery [activities] part. No, this is who he becomes. This is why he hits his sister when hitting is completely wrong, because I lash out. You know? That is what haunts me and I don't know how to do it ... I hate that me (Mae, RPM3).

It is when I read honest mothers' anecdotes that I remember I am not alone, and that I can forgive myself again for failing my children.

5.3 Intrapsychic Judgement and Punishment

Reflective Journal (February 2024)

I am working hard to find real-life, current examples to prove the idea that I am being judged and punished by society for my mothering because I do not abide by mainstream rules, and that I am therefore not free to mother my children in the way I choose. I am failing at finding legitimate examples to substantiate the level of judgement and punishment I experience. Does this mean my judge is primarily intrapsychic, projected from my mind onto society? It may be so. It may also be (I wonder?) that the version of me who feels judged and punished is roughly the age of my pre- and adolescent angry self, the one that I have supposedly outgrown decades ago.

An explanation of the exact dynamics between social and intrapsychic (or, in Freudian terms, father/God and super-ego) judgement and punishment lies beyond the scope of this thesis (see Freud 2018/1927 for a detailed discussion on his id-ego-super-ego personality theory). The more relevant question here, is why most of us RPs feel so often judged in a so-called free society, even if we do not have enough anecdotal material to substantiate our perceived levels of guilt. I understand this internalisation dynamic against the background of Freud's personality theory, in which the ego-ideal (or super-ego) tries, in any way, to answer to 'what is expected of the higher nature of man (*sic.*)' (ibid.: 29). As far as the (psychoanalytic) ego does not want to, or is not

able to meet this ideal, the conscience (that exercises censorship in the name of morals), and self-judgement produce a sense of worthlessness, despondency, and possible depression. This dynamic explains why we do not necessarily need constant examples of social judgement and punishment for us to feel an intrapsychic sense of failure and guilt.

In his essay *The Burnout Society*, Han states that today's 'achievement-subject' thinks of itself as free but is in fact intrapsychically bound in a self-exploitative way (2015: 35). Han believes that the Freudian psychodynamic only makes sense 'in repressive societies that found their organisation on the negativity of prohibition and commandments' (ibid.: 36). He describes contemporary Western society as an 'achievement society' that is progressively freeing itself from prohibition and commandments and presents itself as free. Because people do not believe they *should* (as in Freudian society) anymore but that they *can*, they have become 'poor in negation' (they cannot say no), and because they believe they can do anything, they burn out (ibid.). Maybe I *can* does not mean I *should*, but in an achievement society it means I *should be able to*. Han speaks about an 'I-tiredness' that 'annihilates all reference to the Other in favour of narcissistic self-reference' (ibid.). Han's theory resonates strongly with the mother's mental load story (see Chapter 6), not as a negative or an absence, but as too much of a positive; too many roles, too many choices, too many opportunities – with a maternal fantasy that those mothers who offer their children more of themselves and the world, are the better ones. And then there are the mothers who simply do not buy into it. They are the disobedient, transgressive ones; the ones who lick their knives at the breakfast table *because* it is not allowed.

6. DISOBEDIENCE AND TRANSGRESSION

Reflective Journal (March 2024)

This morning, as I was reading Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam's (1466/1469-1536) Handbook on Good Manners for Children at the breakfast table, I licked the excess jam off my knife. Licking a knife is a mortal sin. I have been trying to learn this truth

since I did it the first time at a very tender age. This morning's mortally sinful act was only half-conscious (I was reading, after all), but also half in defiance. I was alone, and laughed aloud when I realised what I had done, and I thought I should do it again when I remind my son and daughter not to – as a joke, of course. Or would it really be a joke? Rose (2018: 141) wonders:

What happens when a mother defies the instructions ringing in her ears and ventures down this strange, other path, trailing the debris of her heart and of everything around her as she goes? Where does it lead? What are the pleasures, the risk and the price?

Erich Fromm starts his essay, *Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem*, with the centuries-old morality-based social insistence that 'obedience is a virtue, and that disobedience is a vice' (1963: 683). He offers a counter-position in the statement 'human history began with an act of disobedience' (in both the Hebrew myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the Greek myth of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods for the furthering of human progress), 'and it is not unlikely that it will be terminated with an act of obedience' (ibid.). He later clarifies this statement by adding that he is 'not speaking symbolically or poetically' (ibid.: 684). Fromm goes further in reiterating his belief that all human civilisation is based on the abovementioned two acts of disobedience. In an earlier work (1966/1942), he explains that from the church (authority)'s perspective, breaking God's rule by eating from the forbidden fruit, is a sin. From a human perspective, 'this is the beginning of human freedom', the first act of freedom, the first human act' (ibid.: 27). Throughout the ages examples abound in philosophy, psychology, sociology, and literature of disobedient and transgressive minds, some of them delightful reading matter (a few of my favourites are Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, 2023/1849; Gide's *The Immoralist*, 2000/1902; Russell's *Marriage and Morals*, 1961/1929; Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 2014/1930; Nin's short story collections, e.g. 2008/1969 & 2006/1954; and more recently Winterson's autofiction, e.g. 1996/1985 and her autobiographical writings, e.g. 2012).

During the RPMs, we used the terms disobedience and transgression interchangeably, yet a useful aside is to note the difference between failing (making a mistake or not getting something right), transgression (the Biblical sins of commission, therefore an act), and disobedience (the Biblical sins of omission, therefore the absence of an act) (Gauge, n. d.). I found a lovely example of Jackie's contemplations to transgress and an explanation of her actual transgressions in the excerpt below. Here, she is not only disobedient, she is actively transgressive:

Who was it that wrote that quote, was it Erich Fromm? Yes, I love it. Disobedience is the first step of independence. Maybe we must just not obey? Then I remember all those things, when our babies were little, those sort of things about being judged, for breastfeeding and then being judged for not breastfeeding ... I was the one that took my child to conferences or to work, and I would sit in the office and my mom would bring a child. And I sort of thought, I'm just gonna breastfeed this child and to hell with whatever anyone's gonna think about the fact that I sit here in the conference. It freaked out some of my male colleagues, which brought me really great pleasure. Why is it freaking you out that there's a child sucking my breast under a blanket at a conference? If you stay at home, you're judged, if you go to work, you're judged (Jackie, RPM3).

We are slaves if we can only obey, and rebels (not revolutionaries) if we can only disobey (Fromm, 1963: 685). In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau calls those with:

An undue respect for law 'a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order ... against their wills ... against their common sense and consciences ... Now, what

are they? Men at all? Or small moveable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power? (2023/1849: 281).

It is clear in Jackie's example above that she does not only 'act out of anger, disappointment, resentment', as a rebel would, 'but in the name of a conviction or a principle' (Fromm, 1963: 685). Jung's subversive minority comes to mind (1982/1958. See Chapter 4). Jackie seems to be displaying to others, through disobedience and transgression, at least the potential for systemic change (see below for more on systemic freedom). Simone played with ideas of difference, disobedience, and judgement by calling it 'this judgement dance, one that I understand very well' (RPM4). She explained her thought experiment method of amplification as a reality check for her disobedient and transgressive behaviours. This method resonated with many of us around the table:

Where do you stand? Where do you actually say 'no, no, I stand here and this is part of what needs to happen [the way in which I behave; transgress or disobey]'. But if I amplify this [behaviour], if I really blow it up – that is sometimes something I play with in my own head just to get clarity – if all of us were to behave like that, or a significant amount of women would say this is how I'm going to [behave], how would the world be? Let's say a few 100 million of us do it, what would the world look like? ... Does it feel like the greater good is being served here? Something in me sometimes just goes, 'fuck, no, this is not a good idea', and at other times I know I am being true to myself and other mothers in behaving the way I do (Simone, RPM4).

If 'a few 100 million' mothers who disobey or transgress patriarchal norms can use Simone's amplification method, we may have a greater impact on the system (RPM4). But Thoreau offers a clue to why most of us are not able to overcome social judgement

and punishment for the sake of personal freedom, in 'a very few ... serve the state with their conscience also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it' (2023/1849: 282). A clue to the question why some of us find it more difficult to overcome our intrapsychic judgement and punishment and grow into personal freedom – a resistance to personal change that is also at the cost of systemic change – could possibly be found in Rich's (2021/1976) idea that women's primary experience of power is triply negative. Women often believe that 'we have experienced men's power as oppression; we have experienced our own vitality and independence as somehow threatening to men; and, even when behaving with "feminine" passivity, we have been made aware of masculine fantasies of our potential destructiveness' (ibid.: 59). In our RPMs we have found a few moments of collective fantasy of freedom from social and intrapsychic norm, judgement, and punishment. Here is one of those moments:

I was thinking about that fantasy, and wondering what it would be like to be that kind of a permissive mother ... Well, yes, well, you know, your children just find their own way, and you are also still finding your own way, and everything is okay ... There's such freedom in to be wacky, to be just, I can just imagine what it would be like to just sit there and smoke a zol [cannabis] with my [adult] children. The zol is like a, you really need to think and go into your zone with them (Tryfina, RPM4).

But what do mothers need to be able to be more disobedient and transgressive in the name of personal and social freedom?

7. FREEDOM

I believe that when the fear of social and intrapsychic judgement and punishment can be transcended, disobedience and transgression can lead to personal freedom. But if so simple, then why so difficult? Even though I understand maternal identity within a

social constructionist framework (in other words, we basically make up our identities as we go along), I do accept, and reiterate my belief that our individual character structures are partly determined by our earliest experiences within our families of origin, 'which represents all the features that are typical of a particular society or class' (Fromm, 1966/1942: 14), as well as by the socio-economic, gender, race, religion, and other systems we inhabit. Fromm describes 'the mode of life' as *determined* for the individual by the peculiarity of the system, and that it is the most prominent factor in determining the individual's 'whole character structure, because the imperative need for self-preservation forces him to accept the conditions under which he (*sic.*) has to live' (ibid.). He does offer a bit of light after this dooming statement, in 'this does not mean that he (*sic.*) cannot try, together with others, to effect certain economic and political changes' – therefore the potential for more social and personal freedom (ibid.). But Fromm does not blame the system for all of individuals' inability to change their order of things. He questions the idea that submission is always to 'overt authority', and adds the notion of submission to internalised authorities, for example submission to 'duty or conscience', 'inner compulsions', 'anonymous authorities like public opinion' (ibid.: 4). (This notion ties in with the discussion on Freudian intrapsychic judgement and punishment above).

Earlier in my study, I often wondered whether this mother-topic is still valid nowadays. Have we not moved beyond second wave feminism, existentialism, classical psychoanalysis and the likes? Should I rather be reading fourth wave feminism, current gender studies, and focus more on intersectionality? We seem to have moved beyond my topic, as it is no longer the most prevalent in the popular media and public debate (as my Swedish colleague believes – Western, White, middleclass mother stories are simply not in vogue anymore), but we have not overcome it *in our lived experiences*. Because, when I go back to the data gathered for my study, I see constant reminders of nine mostly unfree mothers. With an exception here and there, we still live within the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Even though it is difficult to escape, something most of the RPs have in common is a disbelief or a non-faith in this institution. We can only come to the unknown of faith by surrendering human reason (in other words, we can only have faith in something unseeable if we stop

thinking critically about it). I chose this RP group partly because of my assumption that they can think critically about the current social motherhood status quo (see Chapter 4), that they can fall out of faith with the motherhood institution, thus challenge and help change the patriarchy as religion. Critical thinking (or reason) can lead the mind to be sceptical about the status quo and motivate the will to action. So, disobedience and transgression, and the potential for personal- and social change and freedom, are born.

7.1 What is Freedom?

Reflective Journal (March 2024)

What is Freedom?

Alas! How have I gotten myself into this question? A question asked by the greatest minds of all times and since the beginning of civilisation, a question that the entire existentialist school of philosophy is, sort of, based on. What do I understand of it, what have I to offer to this ancient conversation, where shall I even begin to quote those who matter most – in one paragraph? Even worse, I have a patient who will be waiting for me in exactly seven minutes on the other side of this screen. Okay, that's a good enough reason to slow down now, and to feel – for a mere moment before life outside calls – the glorious freedom in the breeze through my room, the remains of an earlier coffee on my tongue and in my nose, and the knowledge that I have the power to populate my diary in whatever way I wish. At this moment, even if only for this moment, everything seems possible; I am utterly and entirely free.

But back to the multitude of minds, May believes that 'freedom must have some profound meaning, some basic relation to the "core" of being human, to be the object of such devotion' (1981: 3).

May (ibid.) says freedom is illusive, impossible to define, yet he still attempts a definition on two levels. Firstly, 'freedom of doing, or existential freedom' (referring to action, day-to-day doing freedom, not to be confused with existential philosophy), is

the capacity to pause amidst multiple stimuli and emotional triggers, and to *choose and execute* one's response (ibid.: 53). Existential philosophy adds responsibility for oneself and for one's actions to this freedom in doing – the Kantian notion of freedom as autonomy wherein the individual does not float freely, but is bound to critically chosen laws, and always within social contexts (existential philosophy's situatedness: within a certain body with its characteristics, circumstances within time in history, past stories, etcetera) (Appignanesi, 2006; Burnham & Papandreopoulos, n. d.). Beauvoir distinguishes between 'a free woman' and 'a light woman' – a light woman unable to resist and control, 'a lack, the very negation of liberty', the opposite of freedom (1953/1949: 699). The second level on which May attempts to define freedom, is 'freedom of being, or essential freedom', referring to the context from which the urge to act comes, or 'the deeper level of one's attitude' from which the decision to act comes (1981: 55). An extreme example that comes to mind is Victor Frankl's three-year experience in concentration camps during the second world war. He had no freedom of doing at all, but he was free to choose his attitude towards the most atrocious of all experiences; he had freedom of being, and was therefore, according to May's definition, essentially free. Personal freedom, according to May, is therefore always a choice, despite any social context. Hannah Arendt, in a 1966-1967 essay on revolution, does not agree with what May would write more than a decade later. She believes that:

[Political] liberation (i.e. May's social context) is a condition of freedom – though freedom is by no means a necessary result of liberation – it is difficult to see and say where the desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends, and the desire for freedom, to live a political life, begins (Arendt, 2018/1966-1967: 86).

I make it clear in my positioning statement (Chapter 3) that I consider myself socially (at least relatively) free. The other RPs have not spoken much about what freedom is for them, but they have spoken throughout our RPMs about their lack of personal

freedom. Yet, as mentioned earlier, I have not found sufficient anecdotal material to substantiate this sense. I have found clues in the data and literature that could bring us closer to what May's 'freedom of doing, or existential freedom' is, and how that could possibly lead to our sense of more 'freedom of being, or essential freedom' (1981: 55). I do not assume a recipe for personal freedom below, but rather a few musings or ponderings, a meditation, on freedom in a few different forms. As I think about May's stance that freedom is illusive, impossible to define, I realise that my offering below is – for precisely that reason – quite an elusive account of something I am not completely able to say. So, I am proposing a few possible ways to freedom, with reference to literature, primary data, and my own auto/biographical writings. I discuss freedom through motherhood, freedom through separation between mother and child, freedom through a happy marriage/parental relationship or retreating from an unhappy one, freedom through asking our children for reality checks, and freedom through changing our perspectives.

7.2 Freedom Through Motherhood

Beauvoir believes that there is one of woman's functions 'that is actually almost impossible to perform in complete liberty. It is maternity' (1953: 705). Yet, she believes that by becoming a mother herself, a woman has a chance to completely emancipate herself from her own mother – in taking the place of her own mother. The condition for this freedom-in-maternity is that the woman chooses to be a mother, as seen in Simone's statement:

For me, there's something around this delicious freedom of choice that many of us have, in terms of what's the roles we want to take on, you know, are we living in a time where certainly in my culture, you are relatively liberated ... you can choose what you want to do, you can choose who you want to be. You can choose the functions, there's so much choice. There's the pill, you don't have to get pregnant if you don't want it, you've got all these options (RPM3).

7.3 Freedom Through Separation Between Mother and Child

Reflective Journal (March 2024)

Saturday morning. I am wearing a cotton slip, feeling the cool early morning breeze on my naked arms. My feet in the babouche from old town Cairo. I would have been writing in Essaouira today was it not for my imbecilic move to not apply for a visa and having to cancel the trip three days before take-off. Or maybe not that imbecilic (so far, this morning is quite a glorious one)? Johannesburg has been hot recently. I open Knott's Mother: An Unconventional History (2019) on a nondescript place, wondering where my strength for the rest of this chapter will come from. And there it is, a surprise message like the perfect Tarot card or Scripture verse:

In what I find, there's no exact seventeenth- or early-eighteenth-century equivalent to recent notions that nursing is like a love affair, that it is a love affair. There's no anticipation of the literary analogy of erotic romance, or of the best hormonal description being a substance – 'elixirs of contentment' – also made when we snog. It's not that sensations – whatever exactly they were – were absent, it's that they left little or no written trace to be discovered now (Knott, 2019: 141).

I have not been nursing my children for the past six years. My breasts remember the titillation of a suckling, and my heart knows the love affair. I still creep into both their beds for story time at night, with an acute awareness of the fleeting nature of this stage. I am in love with my children. I know it has a lot to do with only seeing them every second week for one short week at a time, that absence makes the heart grow fonder, and so on. But is that the only reason? I teach my patients and my children about mindfulness, I try to live through my senses, I interrogate the natural world, and I write. Without feeling that I have permission to say this aloud (Calvinism and the super-ego's reminder to be humble, you know), I dare say, anyway, that I think I am

in love with my children because I decided to be, and because I decided to see them as separate from me. Rich says:

Just as lovers have to break apart after sex and become separate individuals again, so the mother has to wean herself from the infant and the infant from herself ... the mother needs to let it go as much or more for her own (2021/1976: 18).

This is the beginning of what freedom in mothering is, for me.

Rose (2018) refers to Beauvoir's writings about maternal freedom (see *Psychic Blindness* in *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* for her complete argument). Although Beauvoir would have objected, Rose believes that she gave, in the statement below, 'a very good working definition of the psychoanalytic unconscious' (ibid.: 139):

A mother who dreams of attaining through her child a fullness, warmth and value she has not managed to create for herself is headed for the greatest disappointment ... The child brings joy only to the woman who is capable of disinterestedly desiring the happiness of another, to one who without reversion to herself, seeks to go beyond her own experience (Beauvoir in Rose, 2018: 138-139).

Rose continues in stating that the above is not a plea for masochism (that a mother must suffer for her child, like the *Madonna*), neither for altruism (that a mother should always put her child first, also the *Madonna*). She believes 'it is a way of desiring the happiness of someone other – who happens to be your child – without placing that happiness in the service of your own ego' (ibid.: 139) (like the *Integrated Ambivalent Mother*). This concept resonates strongly with the work that my own mother and I have been doing for many years. Her sitting at a foreign harbour, eating fresh fish with the

husband she loves, and sending her children messages in which she does not state how happy she is, but rather how much she would have loved us to be there with them – an unconscious message that she cannot be free from her children, that her life is lacking when we are away from her? As referred to in my journal inscription above, Rich believes most literature on childcare and psychology assumes that the process towards separation and individuation refers to ‘the *child’s* drama’, and as a necessary part of the child’s growth into freedom and independence, ‘played out against and with a parent or parents who are, for better or worse, givens’ (2021/1976: 17). (See Miller, 1998/1981, for a further fascinating discussion on the pain of separation and autonomy, the importance of separation from a child psychology perspective). Jackie agreed in the playful interaction during RPM1:

We also decided that at six years old [my daughter] needs to sleep in her own bed. Time out. This attachment parenting cannot go on much longer. That’s also the thing that you’re taught in the attachment parenting, it must be that safe space for your child (Jackie, RPM1).

I responded with ‘get her a teddy’, but Jackie was adamant, ‘she wants the real thing!’ ‘It sounds like you just don’t have any space for yourself’, Tryfina reflected. To which Jackie confirmed ‘that’s why I’m so excited and want her to go’ (RPM1).

7.4 Freedom Through Marriage or Retreat

The subtitle to Arendt’s collection of lectures, *The Freedom to be Free* (2018/1960-1967), is ‘People can only be free in relation to one another’. It seems to me that freedom lies in being equals and friends with your partner, in doing the parenting together rather than the mothering alone, in sometimes looking away and arresting your perfectionism, in stilling your socially conditioned sense of duty, because ‘when there is equality, resentment does not exist’ (Adichie, 2017: 13). From my own experience I know that perceived maternal, social, sexual, and/or professional freedom can sometimes lie in the termination of an unhappy relationship. Even though

I have gained more ambivalence, I have been appreciating and enjoying myself and my children more freely since I have exited my marriage. But the opposite is, of course, also the case for many mothers. Throughout the literature and this study's data, I have had the pervasive sense that mothers are on their own (and supported by other likeminded mothers) in a fight against the motherhood institution and against their husbands/partners. And always with a fantasy of elusive freedom that may lie in a loving relationship with someone who parents your children with you, who is on your side. Although I wish to believe some of the RPs are fulfilled and happy enough in their co-parenting arrangements with their partners, I am not able to find anecdotal examples from the data to confirm this. A fulfilled relationship has a profound impact on a mother's experience of her children, her mothering, and her personal freedom. Russell, already in 1929, also believes, in his beautiful melodic tone, that happy marriage/parental partnership has a direct impact on a sense of personal freedom. He believes that 'love can only flourish as long as it is free and spontaneous; it tends to be killed by the thought that it is a duty' (ibid.: 73). With the statement below, he also links to my discussion on projection and projective identification above:

The love of parents for children has suffered through the degradation of the love of parents for each other. Children who are the fruit of joy and mutual fulfilment can be loved in a way more healthy and robust, more in accordance with the ways of nature, more simple, direct, and animal, and yet more unselfish and fruitful, than is possible to parents starved, hungry, and eager, reaching out to the helpless young for some fragments of the nutriment that has been denied them in marriage, and in so doing, warping infant minds and laying the foundation of the same troubles for the next generation. To fear love is to fear life, and those who fear life are already three parts dead (Russell, 1929: 142-143).

In choosing to leave my husband and with that choice to only spend half the time with my children, my story is closest to the apparent freedom celebrated by choice feminism (see Chapter 5 for a discussion on choice feminism). This choice, as seen throughout my auto/biographical writings and the excerpt from our third RPM below, is accompanied by a deep ambivalence as well as a pervasive sense of super-ego- and social judgement and punishment:

That's the rational part, yes, but [in the emotional part] I cannot get away from this fucking judge in my mind that tells me that I've been selfish [for leaving my marriage, potentially at the cost of my children]. See, that's part of my difficulty, that half the time ... I have the luxury of me, and I can do what the fuck I want. And it's absolutely wonderful. But ... it feels like a total impossibility to say it out loud. I'm choosing myself. And with that I'm choosing to only spend half the time with my kids. And I don't want it differently because I do want their father to be as present in their lives as I am (Esther, RPM3).

I appreciated Mae's response to my ambivalence. She asked: 'And why shouldn't they be with their father as much as they are with their mother? You are both the parents. That is what's wrong [in society]' (RPM3). An example of the punishment, even in the seemingly safe environment of our RPMs, is the overt envy expressed by Jackie during RPM1:

I was wondering how much of ... what we carry ... has got to do with those types of gendered roles that you just take on, whether it's conscious or not ... That's why I say sometimes I've got divorce envy, and it's like, I call it divorce pornography. This idea that you can for four days a week not see the kids and have to think: I will divorce him not because I don't love him but

because I just want to escape ... Well, my ambivalence is also because of my relationship with my husband (RPM1).

I was relieved when Jackie spoke about her ambivalence, which is more nuanced than divorce pornography. I believe that any form of pornography is an objectification of a one-dimensional, stereotypical Other. Divorce pornography ignores the ambivalences, pain, punishment, and other lived experiences of the single mother. Rendering the subject invisible is a further social punishment, and the opposite of social freedom. I see the interaction below (RPM3) as an attempt to support, and ironically also as further, unintended, pornography. I was the only single mother in the group, and being envied, pitied, othered, and even patronised was inevitable. A further ambivalence. Yet, I believe interactions like this could help divorced mothers grow into individual freedom despite social judgement and punishment. In that moment I did feel a sense of personal freedom through this permission from the RPs (although, in revisiting the transcript, I read many hidden messages below the consciousness-surface. An analysis of this material does not fall within the scope of my study, a limitation that I discuss in Chapter 8):

Veronica: The nuclear family has been useful to society because it was the basis of institutional life of Western society. So that's why it's difficult to escape the idea of a nuclear family because it's so embedded in the social, the socio-political realm is invested in this. You can't separate the idea of the nuclear family from state, from institutions, from churches. So, you know, you're up against a monolithic mythology and a system. So, the fact that you feel that you've failed that system is perfectly understandable, because it's enormous, it's much bigger than you. And so, you failed in that sense, you failed that system.

- Jackie: That wonderful quote [referring to Fromm], I'm going to print it out, disobedience. You were disobedient to the system.
- Esther: I was absolutely disobedient to the system.
- Mae: You're gonna stick out like a sore thumb, you're going to be disobedient. That's what it is. You're gonna feel like you're going against the grain and you're gonna stick out so ...
- Veronica: You'll probably feel that you stick out more than you actually do, yes, and then in a couple of years' time you'll look around and go, oh, she, she's sort of like me and she, and I actually don't stick out.
- Simone: In a couple of years maybe three quarters of your friends have left their husbands. (Talking together and laughter). (RPM3).

7.5 Freedom Through Reality Checks

Often, when we remember to ask *our children* how they are and how they experience us, rather than asking our spouses, parents, therapists, the books, the institution, we can see how we are really doing with our parenting. In the knowledge that our children are okay, lies tremendous freedom. Jackie offers an example:

This other woman, she's a human rights activist, and she's always busy. She never has time to bake things for school, so, when she goes to these PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) meetings, she brings muffins and things that she bought. And she also checked in with the child at some stage and said, I'm really sorry, I should be the mom who bakes things. And the kid looked at her and said, but mom, you are the mom who changes the lives of people. I think, if we ask our children, they might be prouder of us than they feel deprived. It's that guilt, it's on us (RPM3).

In the inverse, in wondering how we can educate our children to be free, Russell says:

It is not guilt and shame and fear that should dominate the lives of children. Children should be happy and gay and spontaneous; they should not dread their own impulses; they should not shrink away from the exploration of natural facts. They should not hide away in the darkness all their instinctive life. They should not bury in the depths of the unconscious impulses which, even with their utmost endeavours, they cannot kill. If they are to grow into upright men and women, intellectually honest, socially fearless, vigorous in action and tolerant in thought, we must begin from the very beginning to train them so that these results may be possible (1929: 138).

More recently, David Hawkins spoke about the education of children from within the REA, and that respect for children (rather than only love), includes providing for children 'those kinds of environments that elicit their interests and talents and that deepen their engagement in practice and thought' (Hawkins cited by Edwards et al., 2012: 80). Only if mothers involve their children in their own social- and natural worlds, in safe but still rich and novel ways, would their children be able to help them with reality checks, would they grow free in relation to each other.

7.6 Freedom Through New Perspectives

'The capacity to experience awe and wonder, to imagine and to write poetry, to conceive of scientific theories and great works of art presupposes freedom. All of these are essential to the human capacity to reflect' (May, 1981: 5).

Reflective Journal (March 2024)

Friday evening, 18.30 – the time when normal urbanites without children prepare for dinner or the cinema, when normal urbanites with children pop the corn for a movie in.

I am sitting at my honey-coloured desk again, wondering, again, how to go ahead. Just this time, it is not continuing as much as preparing to end. What the hell will I be doing with Friday nights when I do not have this glorious excuse anymore?

*I remember not appreciating the compulsory positive psychology module during my clinical training. I liked the blood and guts of psychopathology, imagining that that was the real shit. Years before then, during our early adulthood, my friend had to undergo a colonoscopy while awaiting a difficult medical diagnosis. I did not know what to wish her, so I made a list of beautiful things and sent it to her. Now, as I am wondering how to end this chapter of impossible expectations, judgement, punishment, and eventual freedom for a lucky few, I want to go back to beautiful things. What do I want to wish despondent, overwhelmed, resentful, unfree mothers without sounding as if I am trying to make nice – as if I know it all and get it right? My wish is multi-fold, and mostly has something to do with time and vibe. Slow down and choose your vibe, I want to say. But how do I say that in proper *Lingua Academica*? What I wish despondent, overwhelmed, resentful, unfree mothers is:*

To slow down, linger, to become re-encharmed with the world. ‘This freedom of being, or essential freedom, involves the ability to reflect, to ponder, out of which the freedom to ask questions, whether spoken or not, emerges’ (May, 1981: 55).

To be kind. To yourself, your children, other children, your partner, your co-parent, your parents, other parents, non-parents. To just be kind. Mae shared a kind experience during RPM3:

It happened to me on an airplane once when I was traveling with my baby, a mother turned to me and she said, Don't make eye contact with anyone, you'll be fine. Just don't look at anyone. Your baby's screaming is not your fault. So, if I assume you're going to support me rather than assume you're going to judge me, and if we do more of the supporting, maybe the

assumption will change also that the people around us become much less judgmental. It's our judgement that we are projecting onto them (Mae, RPM3).

To not gossip. About other mothers. About anyone. To bring your gaze back. To not project.

To get to know yourself. To try and understand why you judge, if you judge. To work on your own story of being mothered/not. To talk to other mothers, to your partner, your parents, your children, your friends. To work on your boundaries. To not repeat your story with your children. To drop your paranoia. To believe in the good. For all the above: to go to therapy if you need to (Rose, 2018).

To stop seeing mothering as only a chore. To play with your children – sometimes the games you choose to play, not only theirs. Enjoy it – the games and the children, really.

To imagine the internal worlds of your children, to try to get to know their minds as separate from yours. To marvel in their separate minds.

To not take the blame, even if it is aimed at you (the mother is always guilty anyway). To not take it on. But to 'give yourself room to fail' (Adichie, 2017: 11). To learn from your mistakes and to apologise when you fail.

To raise your children – especially your boys, but also your girls – to be feminists, to be equal, to be free (Adichie, 2014).

To allow yourself time to not be a mother, partly to escape the feeling that you need to escape from your life-as-mother all the time. Sometimes get a babysitter.

To play curiously with your own body, like when you first discovered her. This time freely, lovingly, guilt-free.

Here is an I-poem I wrote from Jackie's WT3 in which she explains some of what freedom is for her:

I can go Home and Dance in the Kitchen While We Cook Two-Minute Noodles (Jackie, WT3)

I stand in front of the mirror.

I walk out of the door, there are only old, White men on the wall.

The people get up as

I walk past them (what I say can literally become the law).

I have no idea what to do.

I walk past another person who gets up.

I'm not one for all this pomp,

I don't know why some people have to get up for others

I say, 'equal before the law(yer)'.

I'm here, in a job I dreamed of

I stand in front of the mirror.

I fasten the top button of the school shirt

I put on the biffy (It was my dad's)

I shiver a little.

I am determined to show a different kind of justice to this gown,

*I call it a *jassie.*

I said:

I do not really know what I must do.

I am not sure to what extent

I should let on

I am a mother.

I just know:

I am a judge for the next ten weeks.

I got ready for the job.

I see the road ahead

I wonder how much

I am going to judge myself

(I wonder) how much

I will be judged.

I wonder if a soft whispering in their ears

'I do the best I can' will be enough.

I must choose between...

I am going to be judged

I must now judge.

I grinned and said

I should get a 'JusticeMamma' handle.

I judged that mother

I scrolled through her [social media account].

I high-five myself when

I remember to cover a mattress when my kids have a sleepover.

I feel so guilty for judging her

I cannot stop.

I am a mother who judges her own child's work.

I do not yet know the script for this performance,

I walk around and whisper, 'the court will adjourn for tea until 11:30' –

I must remember to say court adjourned.

I am the only woman in the court.

I have to listen

I have to look at the witness to decide if he is 'credible'

I can use what he says to make my judgment.

I want to turn off his camera because his fidgeting is just too much

(the law will hold it against him), and

I am the law now.

I keep wondering how

I can write

I now have to speak

I'm terribly sorry

I cannot trust his version

I cannot think on how to do this in law-speak.

I'm back home again and my child does.not.stop.speaking.

I have never seen so much life in such a small body. Sometimes

I'm afraid

I force myself to listen carefully

I work out of town now

I come home later

I still feel decent food must be on the table.

I now permit myself to accept that two-minute noodles can sometimes be a meal.

I lie and I say

I'm going to pee

I just want to sit still on the bed for a few minutes.

I understand the science and reasoning behind being present,

but holy fuck, the pressure to be present!

I did not realise how rough the last two years were, until

I realised it.

I found myself crying incessantly.

*I would sit and drink coffee, the tears would flow just as gently as the memories of the
loss of the past two years.*

I was told since I was small to carry on, that

I could be anything I wanted to be

*(except incredibly, desperately, sad, **gedaan).*

I wonder if that was actually true.

I don't think it is.

I asked my doctor if we could try an anti-depressant for my long COVID,

I add shamefully, also a little for all my crying,

and for me to want to be with my kids again.

I am grateful there was no judgment from the doctor.

I ask, only for six months;

I just want to breathe again,

I just want to get my brain a little open,

I just want to find the capacity to want to be with the ones

I love.

I felt able to breathe again.

I wanted to be with my kids again, and my husband

(we started dancing in the kitchen again).

I still do not know whether it is long-COVID or depression or a bit of both.

I do not ask.

I can think.

I'm not telling anyone

I had to take pills to want to be with my kids again

I don't want to tell people about it, because what kind of mother ...?

I just know I have not shouted at them in a long time.

I get up and stand in front of a mirror in an office that looks like the office of an old man

...

I go home and dance in the kitchen while we cook two-minute noodles.

* jassie = a little jacket

** gedaan = done, depleted

7.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the final data chapter in my thesis, I further developed the *Madonna-Whore* myth as one of the major themes of my study. I gave a general definition of social norms, I mentioned some of the actual norms that we RPs feel judged by, and I discussed some of the ways in which society judges and punishes mothers who do not concur. I discussed mothers' comparison of themselves to other mothers, and how they judge and punish themselves. I explained my political use of the term *anecdote* as well as the importance of anecdotes for normalisation. I ended with a discussion on social disobedience and transgression, and a definition of personal freedom and some ways of getting to personal freedom.

In the first section of Chapter 8 I reflect on my entire research project; on my personal experience of this 'doctoral journey as an emotional, embodied, political experience' (Twinley & Letherby, 2022, referring to the book title). I discuss the contributions on writing, theory, methodology, participation, and the text's effect on the reader that I believe I make through my study. I further report on the other eight RPs' reflections on their participation in my study. I conclude this chapter with thoughts for further studies; firstly, related to the political- and skills-based silencing that occurred between some of the RPs, and secondly, on the limitation of my role as non-therapist and full participant. And then a goodbye.

CHAPTER 8: SO WHAT? AND SO IT IS.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the first section of this the concluding chapter, I reflect on my entire research project; on my personal experience of this ‘doctoral journey as an emotional, embodied, political experience’ (Twinley & Letherby, 2022) interwoven with those of the other research participants. I discuss my original academic contributions under five headings, namely On the Command, On Theory, On Methodology, On Participation, and On the Reader and Projective Identification. I conclude with a section on that which is beyond this project under the headings Silencing (political and skills based), and Psychoanalysis of the Data and Group Psychotherapy. And then a pause, a gentle goodbye to this part of my story.

2. A CONTEMPLATION

Reflective Journal (August 2024)

I am hesitant to start with Chapter 8. This is the swan song. I feel dramatic and sentimental about it. It must be perfect (of course) and pay homage, respect, appreciation to the participants and their data and my supervisor and my children and my mother and first reader etcetera and to the birth of my newly found academic voice and my new self, and especially to this four-year labour-of-love-project. How can I complete this Lacanian, or Derridean, beyond-language task without risking spoiling it with too many words? How can I pay homage in the most respectful way without hyperbole? On the other hand, ‘Cixous ... writes of excess as effusion, eros, poetry, drunkenness, and laughter’ (Conley, 1991: 28). Is academic language stripped of pomp and excess (read body and emotion) not exactly what I am negating throughout this study – a celebration of body and emotion? Thinking Woman (Dragseth, 2015), Reflecting Rogue (Gqola, 2017), A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women (Hustvedt, 2016). As I admire these titles on my shelf and wish I had thought of them first, I ponder on all the great minds I have read since starting this study, and long before; on the writing tasks and participant meetings I have been privy to; on

conversations with my supervisor, first reader, therapist, my children, mother, others, and all the nighttime dreams, daydreams, despondencies, desires in my dear diary. I refer back to complexity theory (Theise, 2023), how a mind is shaped by a myriad factors (Chapter 2), and how I can never completely tell what happened in and around me during this study.

(Reminder to self: this is the story of your entire writing process. This is how you have felt before every single other chapter – maybe just with a little less drama in your head and without the sense of an ending. Thank you, Julian Barnes, for these words just stolen from your beautiful novel. The sense of an ending. And always the surprise at that moment when realising the chapter has grown a silhouette, and bit-by-bit also a face, a body, and a gut. Just get to it).

3. CONTRIBUTIONS

Reflective Journal (August 2024)

It is not in the nature of good-girls-raised-in-patriarchal-Calvinism-to-be-good-women to boast; about themselves or their children or their work. I have to (and dearly want to!) speak about the value that I believe my study adds to the academy, to the reader, the other RPs, and to me. So, how do I do this without boasting? Gayle would say stay close to the data and let it speak for itself.

I believe I created value with my study on four levels, namely for the RPs in our willingness to contemplate, write, and converse beyond what most of us have done before; for myself – as full RP and researcher – in writing myself into a new life chapter through interrogation of my own mother story; for the reader through projective identification and new insight; and for the academy through contributing new method and content. I discuss these contributions under five headings below, namely On the Command, On Theory, On Methodology, On Participation, and On the Reader and Projective Identification.

3.1 On the Command

As mentioned before, I heard the call, or command, for women to write themselves into existence for the first time when I read Cixous' essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) early in my study. I have read this call many times since. Twelfth century philosopher, Hildegard of Bingen already then asserted that women with insight are divinely inspired, and with this assertion 'gave power to women's insights and a mandate to women thinkers' (Dragseth, 2015: 9). She used this theory to encourage other medieval women thinkers to write and teach theology and philosophy. bell hooks' frequently posed requests to feminist academics to write for and about women in accessible language, for 'only by understanding oneself and one's culture can one do the work of transforming oneself and one's culture' (quoted by Dragseth, 2015: xv). Rich believes that 'only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experiences can enable women to create a collective description of a world that will be truly ours' (introduction to the original version, 1976: 16). Olivier states that it is not typical for psychoanalysts to talk in the first person, apply theory to themselves, to write anecdotally, that 'language [in psychoanalysis] has been stolen from women' (1989: 9), and that she, through her autobiographic writing, no longer separates between what she *is* and what she *knows*. But these examples span the Middle Ages and the late 1980's, with the most urgent of them written during the woman's cause and the aftermath of 1968 Europe. Why is it then still relevant today, and for my study? What the adherence to this command had opened was *the possibility for constructing the self through writing*. Cixous' *écriture féminine* speaks not only to women of her time, or to women alone, but rather refers to a life force, something that continues to escape all boundaries, a tone of 'infinite belief in transformations, in a freeing of the individual from social constraints and laws' (Conley, 1991: 15). The call to women to write themselves into existence can be extended beyond only the woman's cause, but rather as a call to personal and collective freedom (ibid.). This is what I experienced in my study through my own writings, and what I started observing in those of the other RPs. Simone reflected, during RPM1, on her readings after WT1:

As I was reading your stories, I got a sense that towards the end ... people had the freedom ... in a way accepting themselves as mothers in their muddled drawl. I don't know if you got a sense [that at first] there was quite some anxiety, but somewhere there was an arrival of, I'm okay where I am ... People got to a point where they could actually say this motherhood is scary, I'm anxious about it, but now I think I accept that it is messy. It is good enough. Did you get that sense too?

Months later, Simone reflected again in a message to the group before our last meeting, which she was unable to attend:

I would love to be there with all of you to mark a closure of a very meaningful process. I'm still harvesting and gathering in [reflection] on what has moved or shifted or stayed with me around being a mother with all the ... universal timeless pieces that goes with it and then the cultural and individual ways of bringing ourselves to that role. I'm gonna miss the wine, I'm gonna miss the conversation, I hope you're going to have an incredible session with lots of laughter, lots of thoughts, and a little bit of mischief. Until we meet again (RPM5).

As mentioned in Chapter 1 and described in the interlude between Chapters 4 and 5, I repeat that whenever I wondered about the relevance of this project, the data indicated to me that this is merely the beginning.

3.2 On Theory

3.2.1 Anecdote

I discussed my political way of using anecdotes in length in Chapter 7. Even though anecdotes are not normally treated as research data, I am not the first researcher using them in this way (Knott, 2019). The more anecdotes can be gathered and included in academic material, the stronger the collective mother-voice will become in opposition to objectifying patriarchal norm and expectation. My inclusion of anecdotes from my study's data into this thesis is a contribution to the collective mother-voice in the academy. In my study, and in life, I approach anecdotes politically for a few reasons. Firstly, because they can help mothers with their own intrapsychic judgement and punishment that stem from unrealistic or illogical comparison. Secondly, anecdotes of mothers of a similar age, socio-economic stance, and/or context can help mothers with their own reality checks. Reality checks are also imperative for the mental health (literally, the sanity) of mothers who are gaslit, judged, and punished from within patriarchal society. Thirdly, although social media comparison is hardly ever useful, an awareness of inequality across social divides could help instigate social action, political pressure, and eventual change. Anecdotes could therefore also play a significant role in socio-political systemic change. A further reason is that mothers' stories have historically not been important enough to be written up (Knott, 2019), and anecdotes are used by feminist historians (like Knott) to fill in a more nuanced history. Here are a few of my reflective thoughts that I wrote while writing on anecdote (Chapter 7):

I am not alone. I know this not because I am being told by theorists or professionals that I am normal, but because another mother's story sounded like mine.

I am grateful to the RPs for sharing these deeply painful stories with which I, and I dare say most mothers, identify – albeit in secret.

It is when I read honest mothers' anecdotes that I remember I am not alone, and that I can forgive myself again for failing my children.

3.2.2 Four Types of Us

A further theoretical contribution from this study is my rigorous interrogation of the *Madonna-Whore* myth as a major theme. I have seen almost-constant maternal ambivalence as the most significant contributor to our maternal struggles, and I believe that it stems from the social expectation and practical impossibility of having to be *Madonna* and *Whore* at the same time. I used Raphael-Leff's four basic mother orientations, namely *Facilitator*, *Regulator*, *Reciprocator*, and *Conflicted* (Raphael-Leff, 1986, 2009, 2010b), and adapted them for my study into four mother-types to help describe the *Madonna-Whore* myth as well as to create alternatives on the spectrum between these two extreme, and therefore impossible, positions. My four types are *Madonna*, *Whore*, *Anguished Ambivalent Mother*, and *Integrated Ambivalent Mother*, with the belief that *Integrated Ambivalent Mother* is the position to strive towards.

3.3 On Methodology

3.3.1 A Social Construction: How the process guided the content *the wrong way around*

I used social constructionism as a philosophical stance in my study (see the discussion on Bruner in Chapter 2). Methodologically, I followed Bruner's premise that humans learn best in social environments where we construct meaning through interaction with others. Hence, I created a writing and conversation group for my study to do just that. We constructed new versions of ourselves (Bruner's 'life making', 2004: 692) in interaction with each other, increasingly understanding our biographies as social constructs, always ready to be rewritten. Auto/Biography as research approach strongly echoes Bruner's philosophy, and therefore I used it in my study (Davidson & Letherby, 2020; Letherby 2015).

As seen in Chapter 4, an important ethical consideration of social constructionist auto/biographical research is that it should be an iterative process in which the data leads the process and outcomes. I started the data collection process with a topic

(maternal identity as social construct) in mind, but without any further agenda. I allowed the RP conversations and WTs to develop without my guidance, and to lead me to the eventual themes. I involved the other RPs in every step of the data creation, and consulted with them repeatedly, asking them to change/delete whatever they felt did not portray them as they believe they are. This approach is a way of actively breaking down power dynamics between researcher, researched, and knowledge production.

As discussed in Chapter 4, I would traditionally have read existing literature on maternal identity, found themes from the literature, and only then gathered data and do a thematic analysis of the data to confirm the themes, all already existing in the literature. *The wrong way around* forced me to really *hear* and *respect* the data. This approach humbled me and opened my eyes to a new part of the academy that I deeply respect.

3.3.2 Mother Space as Academic Project

I did not explicitly write about this idea in my thesis, but in reflection I believe it is an important contribution to the academy. I created a space for mothers for thinking, conversation, and writing *as part of an academic project*. These spaces are typically created (for women/men/wannabe-writers/whoever) as products in the capitalist market or as a community service in faith-based or personal development environments. The value is inherent, of course, but an important distinction between this project and those products, is its academic and political relevance. Mothers' development of self and their stories and conversations that sprout from it, need to be written into the academy and into social awareness for it to help change patriarchal society. With this thesis I hope to provide reference material and questions for further research that, in time, will all lead towards social change.

3.3.3 Creative Data Processing

I believe the combination of ways in which I used my study's primary data to present my research findings in this thesis is unique. I created free-form poetry and I-poetry

from the WTs, used direct quotations from the RPM transcripts, and excerpts from my reflective journal, all interwoven with existing literature to underwrite what my study wants to say. My hope is that the stories from this thesis read as a polyphonic voice, representing mothers far beyond the RPs. A discussion on the value of participation follows below, but in the meantime just one of many personal reflections that I wrote in response to working with the data in creative ways:

Reflective Journal (after writing I-poems from the WTs, May 2022)

I wrote I-poems from the writing tasks of the participants. Oh. My. Goodness. I was very emotional when I did the first round, and I have actually not stopped feeling a deep sense of wonder and gratitude towards this method. It feels like the Oracle using me to write poems that do not belong to me, that I am just the messenger. O. M. G... And I am allowed to use this material in my thesis!

3.4 On Participation

3.4.1 The Value of Participation

The researcher/researched 'self is not separate from the lived self', and 'auto/biographies can serve as a means of understanding (and healing) ourselves' (Maguire, 2006: 4), and can therefore serve as a 'creative, pedagogical and therapeutic resource, a textual site for re-authoring the self and dealing with the ethical consequences of self-disclosure and emotionality' (ibid.). I quoted Twinley and Letherby in Chapter 2 on their belief that feminist research approaches differ significantly from traditional approaches in 'the insistence that research should mean something to those being studied and should lead to change' (2022: 7). I have often referred back to this quote in my contemplations on the ethics of my research practice, in conversations with my supervisor and the other RPs, and in particular during my progressive realisation of the weight of the task that I was asking of them. I felt guilty at times, with an urgency for them to get value from their participation; I over-thanked them and almost obsessively made sure that they knew they could withdraw at any time and only attend RPMs and submit WTs when it really suits them. I also tried to

show my gratitude with a cornucopia at the banquet table during every meeting. I felt indebted. My first attempt at showing gratitude was during RPM1:

I have to express my gratitude, and I'm not sure exactly how to do that ... that you were willing, and some of you seemingly quite keen, to join me. I'm very humbled. And I hope that we can create a deeply meaningful process for all of us ... I hope the reader will get value too ... But until [then, my hope is that] we'll all get value from this. While talking to each other maybe we can have something that we don't have otherwise.

My fear was not grounded, as the other RPs often made the value of their participation explicit during RPMs and WTs. An example is from Mae, after writing and reading WT1:

I was just so moved, more than moved, I was really emotional reading ... everyone's stories. What's struck me is the struggles that we all have with ourselves as mothers.

And my response to reading Mae's comment in the transcript:

Reflective Journal (February 2022)

Taps into my deep humility in being part of this process. Also, this feeling in therapy sometimes, and overwhelmingly so in raising my children. That they chose me to mother them, and that I am privy to some of their experiences, thoughts, development. Deeply meaning making.

Despite the positive feedback and clear meaning communicated throughout the process, I was still relieved to read the final WTs (a reflection on the entire process). Here are a few examples:

Reflective Journal (August 2022)

I need to capture ... something of the overwhelm I experienced at the end of the data collection process. Never ever did I realise how big the impact would be on me in realising how big the impact of participation was on the other participants. At least some of them.

Tryfina arrived at the last RPM with make-up on her face, and beautifully dressed, and sending me photos afterwards of her succulent gardens. She began planting them after realising one day, looking over her shoulder, that she had allowed the whole garden to die. She said that when the rain came, the plants helped themselves back into life. Since then, she has been planting succulents. Is she insinuating that our process has helped her back to life? She suggests as much in response to my response: 'A new dawn, bit by bit. I am touched that you are sharing it with me. Thank you' (Esther, per email). 'It somehow emerged from the process', she responded.

For me there's a softening around the edges. And I think a huge kindness towards myself. And I think that these meetings, even the ones that I didn't attend, allowed for a framework to reflect and think and do. Yes, just allow for some space and air in between, you know, to flow in between things, switching between brain cells (Tryfina, RPM5).

I wrote an I-poem from Tryfina's last WT that she wrote on Spring Day, 01 September 2022:

A Reflection (Tryfina, WT5)

I am (who) as a mother?

I realised, as we travelled along,

I had not imagined (this place and time) still exists.

I missed two subsequent meetings

I entered the group tentatively, not sure whether

I wanted to be here, so uncertain of who

I am.

I remained in dialogue with the task questions

I wrote them all in my head.

I gave myself permission not to be occupied all the time

I decided to read or watch a series in one sitting

I started gardening

*I revisited Kahlil Gibran's poetry as the plants spoke to me about 'life's longing for
itself'*

I learned to forget 'very important' meetings and assumed obligations

I gave myself permission to say no.

I paid attention to the clamorous voices and the clamour started to sound different:

I am who?

I love deeply but do not have to be the ultimate container.

I am my mother's daughter –

I wanted her to be perfect.

I am my maternal aunt –

I vowed never to emulate her.

I am my maternal gran –

I will share some of my food and care.

I am all of them and none of them as

I gather them to my bosom and embrace who

I am.

I wonder if I will write more.

I wonder whether criticism of self and other women/mothers will continue to soften and lose more of its sharp edges.

I can run with wolves once more.

May Thato's reflection speaks about her softening towards her daughters-in-law during the last months, towards their mothering styles in particular. I read in her WT that she also softened towards herself, always harsh, and here seeing that what she wrote was good:

The I-poem, I looked at it and said, that wasn't so bad, was it? Yes. But one thing that I've also learned, somebody was saying I've grown softer, I can see it in how I am with [my children]. Looking at myself, and how harsh I can be towards myself. I'm learning to be more compassionate. And as a mother-in-law as well, especially with my daughters-in-law. I've got a new daughter-in-law, and we are expecting twins this month, and how we now have beautiful conversations with my daughter-in-law ... And when I leave there I feel so energised. So, it feels like I'm thinking about motherhood, that has also contributed to my ... compassion. Maybe I am less controlling and have less fear of separation from my children. I think that's what this has done for me (RPM5).

Mae felt surprised and grateful for her I-poems:

Oh, did I, did I say those words? This sounds so much better than I thought I was representing myself ... Oh, that sounds quite good. Did I write that? It's just that kind of feeling when I read those I-poems that made what I feel

are my moanie, messy feelings sound reasonable, or interesting, or insightful, or thoughtful. I read them and I really liked them, and I felt, ah, these are beautiful (RPM5).

Corinne shared Mae's surprise in reading the I-poems that I wrote from her WTs:

I was quite surprised when it [my writing] was put in the I-poem. And I thought yes, it made me see that sometimes things are buried and then when you put it in the I-poem, oh, it jumps at you, it's quite a shock (RPM5).

Reflective Journal (August 2022)

I feel overwhelmed about this massive task that I had these eight women take on, that they all did it, that we lost no-one along the way. Gayle said at first that I should expect to end with only four or five from nine, and that would still be good enough, with enough material to work with. We lost nobody! I read this as an indication of the value that they experienced through their participation.

Our last RPM was yet another reflection; thinking together about the last writing task and about the entire process that was coming to an end. What did we create, and whereto from there? What were we left with? This conversation demonstrated the allomothering, village space that we built together (Chapter 5). I wrote an I-poem from May Thato's last WT, and discussed the river analogy she used in it for motherhood under the heading *Mythmaking in the Mother Story* (Chapter 6, I-poem: I Am a River). Although we were unable to agree on a greater mother mythology in conversations during the process, in our last meeting, May Thato's river analogy brought us together with reference to our *being* as well as *having* mothers – maybe with our sense of the ending:

I really loved May Thato's description of the river. That sense of not knowing where you begin and not knowing where you end. It really spoke to me. And the sense of connection and you're part of something much bigger (Nadine, RPM5).

Yes, I think it also. It was May Thato's perspective, throughout these sessions, I felt a sense of the process that's bigger than [me] – that identity or that role of being a mother. I got a sense from you [May Thato] that being a mother is maybe somehow bigger than just the individual, which was a containing perspective. When it gets quite intense sometimes I get stuck in my own mothering process or thinking and agonising over things, and it was a step back (Mae, *ibid.*).

May Thato continued: 'You know, when you mentioned tributaries, my body responded with emotion. Tributaries. I'm having a visceral reception of that word' (*ibid.*).

For me, just because the timing of this happened with my own mother's dying and me ending up writing about it, it was really beautiful ... So, in that sense it came full circle for me. This process ended up being more about me in relation to my own mother as opposed to my own mothering, just by the fact that I lost my mother during this process (Cecilia, *ibid.*).

Yes, I also lost my mom. Not too recently, but it was the same thing for me. Just feeling drawn to that rather than only my own role as a mother (Nadine, *ibid.*).

3.4.2 Participation as Incidental Psychotherapy

There exists a common accusation against auto/biographical researchers' work as naval gazing, a way of 'sorting themselves out' (Letherby, 2015: 136-137). Letherby believes that critical scrutiny and self-reflection, which is fundamentally different from naval gazing, is crucial for the reflectivity that is necessary for proper representation of 'the significance of the complex relationship between the self and the other' (ibid.: 137). As seen throughout my thesis, I wrote free-associative reflections on my role and position in cultivating this small community of mothers. In this community process we wrote our *selves* (Cixous, 1976), with a bonus outcome of connection, incidental self- and group therapy, healing. The bonus outcome was *because of* the rigorous scrutiny. So, how could group therapy be incidental? What I planned was a few data-gathering conversations, research (Chapter 4). From the very first group meeting, these conversations unfolded as an unplanned group therapeutic process rather than mere conversations between a few mothers. This was unplanned, as I was researcher and full participant – not therapist – in my study.

What I mean with incidental psychotherapy is the unplanned personal growth value of the process that individual RPs as well as the group as a whole experienced. What was created is: an uncommon talking space (how often does one get the opportunity for extended conversation about this deeply personal and yet universal topic?); camaraderie and group support (we are not alone, we have more support than we often remember); permission to talk freely (mostly without the risk of judgement and punishment); reality checks with each other (that we have so many shared experiences and opinions, that we are not weird, mad, psychotic in our experiences of motherhood); deep reflection with a self-therapy outcome (mainly through the writing tasks), and the group's responses to each other's writing tasks and opinions (peer reviewed writing). The incidental group therapy took place *in relation to* each other, the individual healing was possible *because of* each other. It is because of each one of us who paid heed to the 'funny desire stirring inside [ourselves] (to sing, to write, to dare to speak...), that we together resisted death' one conversation and one writing task at a time (Cixous, 1976: 876).

What follows is an excerpt to demonstrate Mae's struggles through the writing process, and its eventual therapeutic value:

I found the first writing task much easier. And I thought I was keen on doing it again and again. But then ... I actually felt like I can't write. I was sitting there ... I needed to send it to you ... I wanted to send it to you. And I felt like I don't know how I'm going to. But it's also interesting to work through that. This was more of a therapy writing exercise (RPM2).

My response was:

That's the value that I'm wishing for. My deepest desire is that the people around the table will get value, and that it is not only me that reaps fruit from it. I was quite amazed by how much more experimental the writing became, even in the second round, and the different approaches that we all took ... Mae, I'm wondering whether you have anything in mind about what [the writing] is supposed to be? (Esther, *ibid.*).

Mae replied: 'I thought that was maybe oversharing. My kind of unfiltered feelings and thoughts' (*ibid.*). 'Until you read mine, I'm sure you realised that you're not oversharing' (Esther, *ibid.*).

Yes, I just wasn't sure I was getting this right. And maybe I felt like there's too much about me in it. We have this idea that mother is an identity ... but it's not my only identity. I felt today, thinking about my children right now, I had other problems too. I think that's also what I was going through today,

it wasn't a heavy day of momming. Just today. I was also feeling that I'm actually just thinking about other stuff. And was that okay? (Mae, *ibid.*).

Jackie normalised Mae's ambivalence in admitting that she had similar feelings:

I was thinking I'm writing this and I'm dealing with my own shit while writing this, with my own mother shit that plays into the mothering so there is a link, but this is so self-indulgent. I wanted to write to you (Esther) that this is so egotistical, me writing about myself and my feelings. I also really struggled with the second (writing task) and then I thought that am I using this as a cheap therapy session (RPM2).

I pushed Jackie into further reflection by asking: 'Did you join this study just to appease me?' (Esther, *ibid.*). She answered:

One did so. I think I heard that also from Mae. It's not what it's supposed to be, but nobody said it must be X, Y, or Z. So why question [my writing]? And then that's perhaps also part of the study. Our expectations that we think other people have of us we then have to [meet]... How fucking unhealthy is that? I also wondered whether I wasn't moaning too much. And I was thinking this is my mom on my shoulder again, this is exactly what I'm fucking writing about' (*ibid.*).

Mae came to acceptance of her own writing and created the possibility for further exploration-through-writing: 'I think it's good to know that it can just be whatever it is. And we all just give each other permission like that's what it is' (RPM2). I responded to Mae with a reminder and an observation: 'So you also know ... [your writing] can

be anything, and what I appreciated about your writing ... was the extreme honesty. And that's the extreme honesty that you are second guessing now, I think'. 'Yes', she said, 'because it just was like it's therapy' (Mae, *ibid.*).

If we could really think about our own experiences, including our maternal ambivalences, we open up spaces for thinking about our own mothering, 'and, with it, the possibility for more competent and creative parenting' (Baraitser & Noack, 2007: 172). Psychoanalytically, if all aspects of the self are integrated instead of the bad parts split off and projected onto our children (which is a normal, and also a painful part of mothering), if they can hold their own maternal ambivalence, mothers create in their psyches 'scope for the flexibility and the range of emotional and intellectual responses that motherhood appears to require' (*ibid.*: 173); manageable maternal ambivalence can lead to critical thinking. The thinking created by mothers through their ability to hold their ambivalences can help mothers to consider their children more and more creatively and to keep a positive self-image as good enough mothers (*ibid.*).

3.4.3 The Value of Reality Checks

I addressed social and intrapsychic judgement extensively in Chapter 7, including the idea that mothers are held to impossible standards. In this section, in reflection on the value of this study for RPs, I would like to demonstrate something of the value that we got through hearing each other's stories, and being able to measure ourselves against those reality-based examples rather than against social media and other curated stories. I demonstrate this with an excerpt directly from the transcription of RPM3:

Veronica: He's gonna have a mother who lost her shit *and* a mother who loved him. Those will occupy his psyche. What occupies my psyche is the fact that my mother gave me two or three hidings *and* the fact that my mother loved me. I think it's different for a child who's abused, who doubts the love. I never doubted my mother loving me, even when she was hitting me with a hairbrush ... We are a product of all the many things that our

parents did right and wrong, and there's no escaping that ... I think we all have to balance your good side, your conscious mothering against your irrational, sometimes hysterical mothering.

Esther: But we don't communicate that. We don't even tell our very close friends.

Veronica: No, because it's embarrassing.

Esther: Yes, of course ... The reality checks helped me tremendously to know that other people that I think are intact, shout at their children It's because we don't tell each other those stories that we judge ourselves so harshly.

Veronica: I just assume that everyone fucks up. Good enough parents, competent parents fuck up too. I think of myself as fairly rational and quite grounded, and I've held my small child and screaming in her face like a crazy person. So, I think I'm a rational, intelligent grounded person, other people have got to be treating their kids the same way. That just has to be true.

Jackie: But the fact that one doesn't speak about it, isn't it very similar to that Instagram mother that just portrays perfection?

Veronica: Her (Instagram mother's) job is to project a version of motherhood that has no bearing on my life. Because it isn't true. It is a fake representation of the world. If I'm comparing myself to her I'm going to fly to cocoo land ... If I'm going to compare myself to anyone, I probably compare myself to all of you. Because we're sort of roughly the same age, probably roughly the same class, the same levels of education. So, you know, I just listen to how you mother and that's how I compare myself. And I

assume you've all fucked up with the way I've fucked up. I'm assuming that because that feels human to me. It feels like a normal thing.

Jackie: But why don't we talk, well we talk here about these things where we fuck up, but ...

Mae: It's a huge sense of shame though.

Jackie: Yes, it is a shame. I'm not going to tell people, they're too judgmental. I've probably told two people in my life that I've lost it with my child. It's shameful. It's a shitty thing to do. I'm just wondering whether the self-judgment comes from the fact that it seems impermissible to talk about it. I don't feel comfortable saying that, yet. And I wonder whether the self-judgment comes from that, the not telling.

As argued in Chapter 7, I believe that mothers need to speak to each other if they wish, over time, to increase general social pressure to change patriarchal systems. My study contributed to actioning this belief through creating a talking space, acknowledging anecdotes as research material, and acknowledging the importance of reality checks.

3.5 On The Participant/Reader and Projective Identification

I discussed Bruner's social constructivist theory of meaning in Chapter 2 – that a prerequisite for meaningful participation in social groups is an interpersonal, intersubjective, collaborative process of creating shared meaning (1986, 1990, 2004). I also spoke about Bruner's two modes of cognitive functioning (logico-scientific- and narrative modes. See Chapter 2. Bruner, 1986; Rutten & Soetaert, 2013). Regarding the narrative mode, as used throughout my study, Bruner speaks about stories – being told and listened to – as a primary mode for individuals to become part of their social groups. Scherer & Norman (2023) use Rosenblatt's *Reader Response Theory* to help understand how our identities are shaped by the transaction of reading (where the

reader/listener bring their personal context to the text as well as getting information from it), and to understand how 'our readings shape, but also are shaped by our contexts' (2023: 1). When an RP's reading/listening to other RPs' stories is seen as a transaction, as in the Reader Response Theory, the value of participation seems to be inherent. I wrote an I-poem from Nadine's final WT, in which she reflects on the value of her own writing as well as on reading and hearing other RPs stories:

A Reflection (Nadine, WT5)

I wonder what it was about the invitation that made each of us say yes.

I seemed to cover the ground

I reached a point where everything had been said

I realised that the process of writing only made me understand how little

I know.

I found a creative register helpful in articulating things that were inchoate

I was surprised: my thoughts on being a mother made me turn to being mothered

I am sure that it will feed into my own story as a mother.

I heard anxiety, guilt, frustration and fear around the table

I felt angry about the impossible, invisible standards we are measured by

I was struck by the women's response.

I wonder what it is like to be free from expectations.

I felt the urge to console

I saw anxiety, ambivalence and fear in my own stories

I discover that the need to console is a means of self-protection

I discover that I still have to ward off

I know I have dismissed.

*I heard accounts of mothering different to mine
I like the glimpses into other possibilities
I hope this can be opened up more.*

*I reflected on my own history as a mother
I reflected on my early ambivalence
I don't like to think about it too much
I sometimes doubt my mothering in the present.*

*I realise that the freedom to choose comes with problems
I don't feel ambivalence so much as responsibility
I see how strong and confident my daughter is
I find that she has also become my teacher.*

*I see a slow shift in my own mothering consciousness:
I don't want to control
I want to be curious.
I am curious about what motivates my child
I am open to the way she is different to me
I see the differences in the way she sees the world and the way she does things.*

*I am beginning to realise that this can also be extended to being curious about myself
and my reactions as a mother.*

I spoke about the psychoanalytic concept of projective identification as a mode of communication in Chapter 7. Because participation in my study included that RPs read each other's WT's and listen to each other's anecdotes, projective identification played an important part in the participant experience. The effect on us was often one of being truly understood by the others. An illustration of this is my response to WT3 (On Judgement) in RPM3:

It was quite unbearable for me to read all of your stuff. It just triggered me on so many levels ... And it felt as if most of those stories tapped into mine ... And I think it has something to do with the impossibility of our position. This is the story of me. I'm not going to escape this judgement story as a mother, and I think that is the dread and maybe some despondency. It just is what it is (Esther, RPM3).

As a defence against unwanted- and often frightening parts of ourselves, Ogden speaks about projective identification being used to 'create a sense of psychological distance' (1979: 362). This also happened often during our RPMs and in response to others' WTs. After reading WT3, Jackie could not understand why any of us would judge ourselves by certain things that she does not recognise in herself:

When I read through all the things that you guys judge yourself about, I thought why the hell are you judging yourself for this? And I know the same is possibly true for the things that I judge myself by (Jackie, RPM3).

Simone's reaction to both my and Jackie's positions illustrates how we often oscillate between projective identification as mode of communication (to create psychological closeness with others), and as defence (to create psychological distance from aversive parts of the self):

This whole thing with this writing task has just opened the whole can of worms again ... I've done work around judgment in my life. And then sometimes I wonder, did anything change? It keeps coming back. And I know, actually, I do know, I know I've moved with it over time, I've moved a lot. My judgment of others also has that ricocheting effect. I judge and [my

judgement] immediately comes back on me. It doesn't take me long to just swap, to turn it around and then [my self-judgement] process gets triggered (Simone, RPM3).

4. WHAT DID I FORGET, WHAT'S MISSING, WHAT'S NEXT?

4.1 Political and Social Silencing

I argued in Chapter 2 that there is widespread socio-political agreement that one's positionality also grants or silences one's voice within a specific context (Misawa, 2010). Two examples of silencing arose from within my study: one of racial silencing, and another of silencing through unequal writing skills. The first (racial silencing) I anticipated, and partly informed the rationale for my decision to use transcribed conversations as well as writing tasks. I thought that the writing would help those RPs find their voices who might otherwise be silenced in group conversations. The second (silencing due to skills inequality) I did not anticipate.

I believe that May Thato (one of three RPs of colour and one of two non-South Africans), and Cecilia (also one of the three RPs of colour and the other non-South African) were often silenced by louder, White, South African voices during the RPMs (see May Thato's character sketch in Chapter 4). Cecilia often participated in the conversation only through echoing the arguments of other group members. May Thato often disagreed but was not able to do so openly in the RPMs. Her contributions, although very limited in volume, facilitated significant conversations amongst RPs. I see her silencing as a loss for the group process as well as for the data. (Yet, I have used her limited contributions extensively in this thesis, and I believe that she emerged as a strong voice amongst the RPs. This is testament to the power of her content, and reinforces my point). Herewith an example of May Thato's silencing and the power of her content, as she reflected on it during RPM5:

I can't write. I even can't write about [conversations with my daughter-in-law] as they happened. I start thinking I'll write about my mother,

motherhood from her point of view. I feel excited, I've got something to write for the group, and then it fizzles out. And then I was going to write something but it wasn't fiction, and then I just feel like this is too much for me, I can't write. But I'll tell you the metaphor that came to me ... that of a river, of the small tributaries that that have caught into me, of generations ... that are there in my every fibre, and how I started thinking about you cannot be mother in isolation. If I was going to write fiction, how to use the river? Have you ever seen a river that fails to carry it's burden? It carries what it needs to. Sometimes it will park it's burden somewhere, but every now and then, if there's a good flood it will carry that. I don't know a river that gives up. It might be dry when you fly over the land, you see those lines, or when you fly over a desert and you see those grooving lines and you say gosh, this place is dry. But you know there's water also under those streams that we can't see. And come the rains. I would have written something along those lines. I don't know if I can write any fiction, I really don't know (May Thato, RPM5).

Because of my role's limitations, it would not have been appropriate for me to make overt observations or process interpretations of this silencing group dynamic – something that would have been possible if my role were that of therapist/group analyst or facilitator. I see this as a potential gap that can be addressed in follow-up research. Ironically, I also often felt silenced by my position as full participant and non-therapist, but who had some process and psychoanalytic insight. I saw group dynamics during this process that I was not able to voice. This limitation, and sometimes frustration, was a major theme in my experience as group member. A rigorous discussion on this theme lies beyond the scope of my thesis and is another gap for follow-up research.

The second example of silencing that arose from my study was caused by the large discrepancy between RPs' writing skills and writing experience. This caused another group dynamic that I was not able to address because of my role and the nature of my study. I included a group member with substantially more experience and skill in fiction writing than the rest of us. From a group analytic perspective, I believe that the quality of her writing intimidated, and even stifled, some RPs. Some of the RPs spent an enormous amount of effort judging their own work against the writing of other RPs (which, of course is not only because we did not all have the same experience and skills level). I believe that, even though competition was discouraged, unconsciously the bar was set impossibly high.

4.2 Psychoanalysis of the Data, and Group Psychotherapy

Throughout the process and now, in retrospect, I believe that the more experienced writer contributed enormously to the process, and I am grateful for her participation. However, I had a great urge to interpret this group dynamic (in other words, to say out loud what I believe was being played out in the group unconscious, to explore the reasons for it in conversation with the other RPs, and to help the group understand and dissolve this dynamic). This is an observation and interpretation that might have been a relief for the group, and that might even have created the possibility of writing more freely and daringly if we were to work through it in a group analytic process. I share an example of this group dynamic of great resistance against fiction writing below:

I'll start by making excuses why I didn't write the fiction task ... I didn't do it because I had two other writing deadlines. But they were done by Wednesday. So, I thought I could send you something Thursday or Friday ... but when I sat down to try ... the fiction thing floored me. I was so full of self-judgment ... And what would the fiction story be? And the story that kept coming up was the perfect happy mom story, but it's so flat (Mae, RPM4).

I desperately wanted the group to think through this shared resistance, and I prompted them with a reflective question: 'So, what makes fiction different? (Esther, *ibid.*). Mae responded: 'There's a lot of performance anxiety for me. I'm not used to writing fiction ... There's a lot of judgement. And that was the first thing: I can't do this'. Simone first offered a logical answer, and then reflected further: 'My husband's father died on Wednesday, and I was almost getting somewhere [with the writing] ... just there was other stuff happening, it was too much'. Tryfina said, 'I've just been grappling with the writing. So, I've got pages with headings, and a few words and nothing else. But the process of ... judgment' (*ibid.*). The internal judgement resonated with Simone:

There's so many judgmental voices going on ... I'm trying to find my own voice, because it always feels like I'm speaking with the voices of others. It's been a very strange experience ... that somewhere in all of that ... I just can't find my voice (*ibid.*).

Jackie also did not manage to write fiction, and tried to explain why:

I wanted to write the story. I'm still writing the story in my head. We had the flu in our house, I might just get started. And then I just didn't have the energy. But I also was thinking that even the other things, how much of the other things that I have written so far is a form of fiction ... we narrate ourselves as stories, and that's the sort of fiction ... My first story in my head was written from the perspective of my uterus. That didn't work because the uterus just didn't want to speak ... Surely motherhood is more than just the uterus (*ibid.*).

And May Thato:

For some reason, I didn't realise that we're supposed to write fiction until I got the email (reminder). Maybe that's where I would never go, it feels so alien for me ... And then when I read the stories – and I know you asked about why I didn't write fiction – and I'm already going into the stories that I will be telling. Firstly, my grandson is in hospital, no worries, and the mother is staying in hospital where she sleeps on a couch. This is an eight-month-old baby, etcetera. I did not write the fiction (ibid.).

Nadine managed to approach the fiction-writing task in a playful way. She argued:

Well, I didn't want to take that too seriously, because I would have probably gotten anxious, because I don't write fiction at all. So, I approached it as creative nonfiction. I thought that was really interesting. And I wanted to talk about how little one knows one's own mother. And I wanted to do that through photographs, because I've been looking at photographs [of my mother when she was young] and thinking about who she was. So, that seemed to be an easy way into writing ... So, it's not about oh, my God, what's the plot? The plot is a meandering thing. And, and then that's not necessarily [historically] true, your memory is flawed. So then there was that liberty just to make up things if necessary. That's actually quite freeing. And you're not writing fiction necessarily. Or just another kind of fiction, some kind of creative process that has to speak to something you want to say (RPM4).

Veronica, who suggested that we write fiction, simplified the genre. She believes that 'fiction is just making stuff up. It's very simple. There's no real definition. And the relationship of those things to truth is subjective' (ibid.).

An analysis of the group dynamics (as seen in the example above) would have given the opportunity for insight, and for the group to move through the impasse. But that is what group psychotherapy is. I was not the group analyst, and I did not do a psychoanalysis of the data; I was a full participant and allowed the data (rather than existing literature or a prior personal agenda) to lead me to create this document. Although this was my intention, and I believe I stuck to it as far as I could, it also leaves me wanting to continue with a further study in which I would analyse the group dynamics, not only during the group process as mentioned above, but also in a later psychoanalytic interrogation of the data.

The other RPs understood the limitations of my role and I did not feel expectations or pressure from them, but I expected of myself to contain/hold the group, and to keep conversation going. The contract with the other RPs (including their expectations), and consideration of the ethical implications are important to note, and a crucial aspect I am very aware of throughout the study (see discussion in Chapter 4). I believe that my professional training, and my personal experience of group analysis have complicated this restricted role for me. At times I wanted to be the therapist, and I especially wanted to make group interpretations as I saw the group dynamics develop and play themselves out. I also find moments in the data where other RPs know this limitation, and tread lightly with their own material because of it:

What I've been walking with since the beginning, with more awareness, is to think of my role as mother. I've been paying attention to it, grappling with it. Because as we've been going through these points where you start writing, and you realise, oh fuck, there's judgment, or I'm judging them, or they're judging me, there's little Pandora boxes opening up ... Because

when this stuff comes I sit with it and now I've got to sort it out and come to a place where I feel I can either integrate something or move on. I don't only want to ignore it (Simone, RPM4).

'The practices of reading and of writing are an extraordinary help', says Cixous, 'because there, in this place, we stop' (1997/1994: 35). My frequent personal journal reflections, which are a crucial part of the auto/biographic research process, and the group's feedback often made me stop, saved me from overstepping this boundary. But sometimes I slipped up. I give an example below of how I did step into the therapist role, and although I did not interpret the group material, I tried to contain the other RPs. A role no other RP would actively take on:

I have to say, in terms of group process, we haven't chosen an easy topic. And there will be things (group dynamics) [unconsciously] playing themselves out. I do think we need to just acknowledge that we are dealing with our deepest, deepest insecurities. And we're throwing it out there for a bunch of almost strangers to read. And it is incredibly exposing. I second-guess myself all the time, maybe all of us do? And then I realise that if I censor too much, I'm not being authentic. And maybe some of the value that can lie in this experience is also that there's less censorship in what we are allowed to say and write here that we can't say and write to everybody around us all the time (Esther, RPM2).

Yet, in further exploration of the data I see clear messages from most of the RPs about the therapeutic value of the process, despite all the limitations. For example, Cecilia's comment during the first RPM: 'When I wrote the first task it was really helpful for me, as my mom just passed away. So yes, it was therapeutic'.

5. A FEW CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Something happened during the last months; I became more gendered. No, I did not become more gendered. I am as aware of gender and the gender construct as I have always been. But I became progressively less angry, and I feel more and more that, as their mother, I am able to connect with my children in a specific way. I do play a specific role. Although this is very gender stereotypical, it also moves me a little bit more into the mythology realm. I am focusing more now on the privilege of being a mother and less on my anger about social expectation. I am starting to feel that my mother role does not diminish me, it makes me bigger. And it makes me part of the collective mother mythology. The shift in me has a lot to do with thinking through this role. So, I feel – the more I think about this, and the more my study matured – I feel more privileged, and I feel more grateful. I have wanted to be part of the mother mythology, and previously thought of it as a collective that I will join when I am very old and wise, or when I am dead. I cannot say that I have ever thought of myself as *Madonna*, but during the last months I have, tentatively and with reverence, been allowing myself to grow closer to the mythology, per definition. But there is also an embodied *Whore*-part of me. This is integration.

I had a big dream a few weeks ago. There was a woman and a man in a Venda pot cave; old, wise, stereotypical woman and man, yin-yang. The woman was my older self with long, grey hair. The man was my first reader, but with a long, grey beard. I was standing in front of them, in a shaft of light, with my daughter and my son, and the woman and man invited us into humanness, into bigger human experience. I remember feeling disbelief at first, and then gratitude and groundedness. I, and my children, belong there. We had arrived home.

The cave, the invitation, is what the study is doing with me. Our (RPs) writings and conversations often reminded me that this is the human story that I am part of. It is almost a surprise, always, when I realise it. I feel grateful and I am a little bit surprised. When anything becomes too large I tend to shy away, I cringe, it is not for me. And that is what I felt when I read your river story, May Thato. When you said ‘Esther, you are the source of this’, I thought absolutely not. This is too big a job, I cannot take it on.

Thank you, it is a compliment, but no thank you. And that is what I have always felt when I thought about mothering in a mythological sense. It is too overwhelming and too big for me, I cannot take it on, *I do not deserve it*. But the Oracle decided that I am allowed to. Sometimes I smile and say thank you. And yes, I am a little bit part of it.

And so it is. For now.

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Paternoster

ek staan op 'n moerse rots langs die see by Paternoster

die see slat slingers in die lug

liggroen skuim

onverskrokke kyk ek elke donnerse brander

in sy gut voor hy breek

die rots sidder onder my sole

my bo-beenspiere bult

my bekken smyt die aangeleerde gelate knak uit haar uit

se moer ek is rots ek is klip ek is duin

helder sing my tiete 'n koperklepgeluid

my hande pak Moordbaai en Bekbaai

my arms skeur ekstasies bo my kop:

ek is

ek is

die here hoor my

'n vry fokken vrou

Antjie Krog

1992

Paternoster

*I stand on a gigantic rock next to the sea at Paternoster
the sea lashes slings into the air
light green foam
unflinching I look each damn breaker
in his guts before he breaks
the rock quakes under my soles
my thigh muscles flex
my pelvis expels the acquired acquiescent crack out of her
not a damn I am rock I am stone I am dune
my tits sing a clear copperclappersound
my hands grab Moordbaai and Bekbaai
my arms tear ecstatically above my head
I am
I am
god hear me
a free fucking woman*

Free translation from:

Antjie Krog

1992