

School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

Au nom de la mère

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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Abstract

Au nom de la mère is a practice-led research project that investigates alternative visions of the maternal as experienced by mother and daughter. In Western culture, the representation of the maternal is confined to a singular depiction that dismisses female complexity and autonomy. I question – how may the medium of photography contribute to more complex and abundant depictions of the mother and maternal relationships? Drawing on my own understanding of the maternal as a daughter, I use photography to capture intimate and powerful moments of a relationship with my mother to uncover the complex dichotomies and multilayered identities inherent in the mother daughter bond. Through my research, I analyse photographic depictions of motherhood and the maternal within Western culture, drawing from a range of examples in art. I fuse Panizza Allmark's '*photographie feminine*' approach with feminist theory and expand on Julia Kristeva's '*Heretics*' as the driving forces for my project. With these influences, my photographic approach provides a space for subversion and transgression. The title, *Au nom de la mère* (In the name of the Mother) refers to my mother's French heritage and maiden name, *du Bignon*. This project facilitates an intimate reconnection with the mother which supports ongoing research into my French heritage and the process of changing my last name from the paternal to the maternal. The act of photography as a creative practice thus allows for enduring connection and *jouissance* with the mother and *du Bignon* name and a revisualisation of the maternal within contemporary society. The outcome of the project is a series of photographic images that reveal intimate and compelling visions of motherhood and mother/daughter relationships.

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Introduction

Photography is the vehicle through which I capture intimate and compelling visualisations of my personal experience and subjectivity. I photograph my mother as a means of both looking inward at myself and reflecting on the complexities and intricacies of maternal relationships. The mother/daughter relationship "...is universal because it's a shared experience among all women regardless of race, class or even sexuality" (Waters 2008, 1). I regard the mother/daughter relationship to be a poignant bond in which, the maternal relationship is central to the construction of self and is the complex dynamic that this research investigate.

Children will often develop deep bonds to their primary carer. My mother raised my brother and I as a single parent from the ages of 3 and 5. Although my relationship with my mother is multifaceted and complex, it has always been supportive and loving and is the most powerful relationship in my life. In many ways my mother can be described as the 'perfect mother', "...eternally sacrificing and self giving" (Liss 2009,xx). However, "there are many mothers who fall outside the club of 'good motherhood' as defined by dominant motherhood ideologies". This includes teenage mothers, older mothers, lesbian mothers and single mothers (Liss 2009). Raised by a single mother, I belong to an unconventional family structure – one not usually shared in mainstream media and image culture. Hence, I am motivated to reevaluate alternative family structures and reconsider traditional ideas of motherhood, in particular, our cultural as well as personal expectations of our mothers. This project allows me to come to terms with my experience of the maternal and single-mother upbringing via a photographic collaboration with my mother. Through my research, I explore how art photography may allow for the maternal to be revealed as a "node of power through which controversy could be controlled, moderated or generated" (McCarroll Cutshaw 2010, xii). I engage in an auto-ethnographic photographic investigation using photography and the portrait to re/present the mother subject and the mother/daughter bond. The camera provides me with the apparatus to search the self via the subject of my mother, showing tender and private moments that reveal a sense of self through mirroring between photographer and subject.

In this exegesis, I combine theory and practice to explicate how my female subjectivity and experience inform my photographic approach. Through the camera lens I seek alternative, intimate and complex depictions of motherhood and the mother/daughter bond that work to probe and subvert portrayals of the mother ubiquitous in mainstream imagery. As Lisa Harding puts it in *'Motherhood*

reimage(in)ed: A study of domestic photography in the digital age, “while the institution of motherhood... divides private and public worlds... those that capture the maternal air – can repair this gap; they can create a bridge between public and private worlds” (Harding 2016, 116). My research investigates and reveals the potential of the photographic portrait to facilitate an intimate and subjective photographic approach that may offer space for new visualisations of the mother and mother/daughter relationships. Through my analysis I will discuss and draw on historical accounts of photography and the maternal to support my arguments. This includes the texts, *‘Camera Lucida’* (2000) [1980] by Roland Barthes and *‘On Photography’* (2008) [1977] by Susan Sontag. I also analyse representations of the mother produced in a contemporary art context citing *‘M/others: one lens, multiple maternities’* (2007) by Toni Wilkinson, *‘Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood’* (2013) by Susan Bright, *‘Feminist Art and the Maternal’* (2009) by Andrea Liss and *‘Motherhood reimage(in)ed: A study of domestic photography in the digital age’* (2016) by Lisa Harding. I examine how photography and art facilitates idealisation of limited models of motherhood – in particular the origins of the ‘good’ mother image. These findings are then analysed in comparison to representations of the mother subject produced in a contemporary art context. I also discuss the work of classical French feminist theorists including Julia Kristeva, Hélén Cixous and Luce Irigaray repositioning their arguments with more recent research conducted by Clare Raymond in *‘Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics’* (2017). I employ a feminist perspective as illuminated by these theorists and attune my arts practice to push for female subjectivity and autonomy regarding the experiences of the maternal.

In chapter one, the symbol of the ‘good’ mother is examined throughout Western culture, history and in art. The ‘good’ mother symbol has emerged from religious iconography of the Virgin Mary, a pictorial construction of maternal identity. With these institutionalised portrayals of motherhood in mind, I consider the development of postmodern feminist ideas and acknowledge a counterculture of women using new media to re-story maternal experience and include the not-so-perfect aspects of motherhood. I discuss how photography in a contemporary art context may resist and refuse this limited ‘good’ mother model and develop sites for female subjectivity and autonomy. Photography must work to refuse imagery that “...manages humans through a bombardment of stereotypical images which calm anxieties in the first instance and prevent interrogation” (Kristeva quoted in Julia Kristeva Live Theory 2004, 154). Within this context, I look at creative practitioners who disrupt and

subvert institutionalised notions of motherhood – Dorothea Lange, Cindy Sherman and Jenny Saville as well Sally Mann, Leigh Ledare, Catherine Opie and Elinor Carucci, are all influential contemporary photographers and visual artists who are motivated to provide more complex and compelling visions of motherhood. Susan Bright's writing in *'Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood'* (2013) and Toni Wilkinson's oeuvre of academic discussion on the topic of motherhood including *'M/others: One lens multiple maternities'* (2010) and *'Uncertain surrenders: The coexistence of beauty and menace in the maternal bond and photography'* (2012) inform the development of my theoretical inquiry. I consider their perspective on how a 'fine art' context may provide a space for practitioners to traverse and transgress dominant depictions of the 'ideal' and 'good' mother. I also examine representations of the mother as developed more recently within the constraints of the western nuclear family borrowing from Daniela Cutas and Sarah Chan in *'Families: Beyond the nuclear ideal'* (2012) and discuss how photography facilitates idealisation of the 'perfect' modern mother. With this research canon my modus operandi is to employ photography as a vehicle for both love and interrogation, an intimate mode of storytelling that reflects on personal experience and cultural norms and regulations.

In chapters two, three and four, the maternal is considered within a psychoanalytic context as ideas of motherhood are explored in relation to the theory of paternal 'law'. I draw on the writings of French feminist trio Hélén Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva whose theories have expanded on psychoanalytic concepts of Freud and Lacan to include and formulate a female subjectivity that exposes patriarchal oppression of women as *Other*. Cixous' feminine writing method *'L'écriture féminine'* and Kristeva's ethics concept *'Heretics'* have helped synthesise the theoretical lens of my work. Although I draw from these "masters" of feminist psychoanalysis whose work influenced artists and writers during the 80's and 90's, I am aware of their limitations. Therefore, I also address current feminist psychoanalysis in relation to creativity and arts practice explored through Panizza Allmark's concept, *'photographie féminine'*, Clare Raymond's discussion of feminist aesthetics and artistic approaches and Judith Kegan Gardiners examination of feminist psychoanalytic methodology. These theoretical jumping boards signpost creative transformations and reveal intimate photographic visualisation of the maternal.

In *'Mothering the Self: Mothers, Daughters, Subjects'* (2002), Stephanie Lawler says, "knowledges about the self, about mothering... about the mother-daughter relationship... are produced and reproduced in specific relations of social and

political power, and in response to specific social and political preoccupations” (Lawler 2002, 3). As a daughter and feminist practitioner, I engage in creative investigation to reinvigorate the mother/daughter narrative. Drawing from Julia Kristeva’s outlaw ethics *‘Heretics’*, I wrestle for revision of mother/daughter representation and use photography as a powerful means to portray unconventional moments of mother/daughter experience. I discuss the work of important women photographers such as Tierney Gearon and Sian Davey who evocatively explore aspects of the mother/daughter relationship. Influenced by Gearon and Davey I elaborate on how I use photography to examine my experience of the maternal, understand identity and contribute to more nuanced and multilayered depictions of the mother/daughter dyad.

In chapter five I articulate how I develop an intimate photographic approach and feminist aesthetic to achieve ambiguity and fluidity in my work. I cite Yvonne Gauderies in *‘Articulating women’s voices: An exploration of women’s subjectivity in contemporary women’s visual art, feminist pedagogy and French feminist theory’* (1993) and introduce my own feminist visual language borrowing from Hélén Cixous’ method of writing of the body, *‘L’écriture féminine’*. This emphasises an intimate and subjective vision of maternal experience and the mother/daughter bond that intends to present multilayered, fluid and ambiguous readings.

Chapter six examines metaphorical ties between photography and the maternal and discusses Roland Barthes’ element of punctum – “the sting... cut, little hole” that wounds the spectator when viewing a photograph. Further discussion introduces Barthes’ suggestion of the inherent relationship between photography and the maternal. Barthes theory is discussed in relation to Esther Teichmann’s *‘Falling into photography: on loss, desire and the photographic’* (2011) exposing the ways in which photography and motherhood are intertwined. From this analysis I explain the significance of the photographic medium as a powerful instrument to explore the complexity of maternal experience.

In chapter seven and eight I express the significance of the photographic medium and expose the photographic portrait as a paradoxical tool for both love and interrogation. The portrait’s paradox lies in the conflict of its function and purpose in which the portrait is both like its subject, “a homage to the subject”, and “a potent means of gaining control over it” (Sontag 2008, 155). The portrait is not static; it traverses boundaries – it is fluid, ephemeral and ambiguous. My discussion

evaluates the writing of Susan Bright in *'Art Photography Now'* (2005) where she describes the paradox and ambiguity of the photographic portrait. Here, I navigate the potential power and risk of the portrait when working within filial subject matter. I outline how this understanding helps me construct intimate, personal and palpable tableaux that reflect a sense of self while at the same time evoking visualisations of an alternative family experience.

The final chapter explicates my rationale regarding the title of the project; *Au nom de la mère*. Language is considered from a feminist perspective highlighting the potential for ambiguity and subjectivity when applying the French language to my project. I explore embedded Western naming structures as developed in patriarchal society and describe how my creative practice works against these conventions to provide a more nuanced, poetic and evocative discourse about motherhood and mother/daughter relationships.

Au nom de la mère allows me to come to terms with the experience of the maternal via the relationship with my mother and my single-mother upbringing. I use a digital SLR camera and develop a hybrid genre combining art and documentary photography to create a series of portraits to be displayed in a photographic art book and exhibition. The project works toward "theories of female power and female ascendancy", which "...must reckon fully with the ambiguities of our being, and with the continuum of our consciousness, the potentialities for both creative and destructive energy in each of us" (Rich 1977 [1976], 283). These words by Adrienne Rich inspire my creative potential as I explore an alternative depiction of a contemporary maternal experience through the subject of my mother. Here, photography is a poetic and personal visual medium, which may traverse, transgress and subvert dominant, traditional and 'ideal' depictions of motherhood and mother/daughter relationships. The female gaze of the feminine subject is not intended to make viewers comfortable. Therefore, the power imbalance between photographer and subject present in the work may unsettle as I photograph my mother in intimate and staged tableaux. Exposed is the vulnerability of both photographer and subject, as the images reveal ambiguous visualisations of mother/daughter collaboration. According to Maurice Blanchot art is always linked to risk, "If the artist runs a risk, it is because the work itself is essentially a risk. By belonging to the work, it is likewise to risk that he [she] belongs" (Blanchot 2000, 346). *Au nom de la mère* is personal and precarious as I explore the self and

expose tender and powerful visualisations of my mother and the mother/daughter bond.

Chapter One: The 'good' mother

Hierarchical representations of the mother subject within the history of Western art and mainstream image culture exclude female subjectivity, autonomy and ambiguity. I critically consider Christian iconography of Madonna and Child from the Renaissance period. Here, the maternal subject is stripped of complex female identity and, contained to "...the perfect paradigm of the figure of ethics and alterity – that is, the giving of self to other" (Liss 2009, xx). This discussion establishes the milieu in which I and many other renegade photographers deviate to reveal the complexity of maternal subjectivity. To support my argument, I draw on contemporary art examples which subversively reference Madonna and Child iconography, including Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936), Cindy Sherman's, *Untitled #216* (1989) and Jenny Saville's *Mother and Children (after the Leonardo Cartoon)* (1970). Further, I discuss the work of prominent photographers including Sally Mann, Connie Petrillo, Leigh Ledare, Catherine Opie and Elinor Carucci. These photographers contravene and counteract embedded accepted religious and masculine concepts of maternity and aim to rewrite women's experiences through the creative process. Andrea Liss in '*Feminist Art and the Maternal*' (2009) states, "reconceiving the maternal as new bodies of feminist knowledge offers revolutionary ways for rethinking human relationships and creating new forms of maternal culture" (Liss 2009, xxi). It is with perspective that I engage a creative process and traverse and transgress limited versions of motherhood that are disproportionate in visual discourse. In doing so, I intend to further redefine concepts of femininity, motherhood and daughterhood as all-encompassing and multilayered identities that endure complex dichotomies of love and loss, trauma and passion.

In '*Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood*' (2013), Susan Bright acknowledges a recent cultural shift of interest to the maternal subject. Taboos associated with mothering and mother/child relationships are discussed and shared in broader cultural discourses, revealing the challenging yet universal experiences of motherhood. Bright notices more women are utilising online outlets such as Tumblr, YouTube and Instagram to share and navigate personal experiences of motherhood, parenting and pregnancy. This shift has helped shape a collective female voice that diverts from the accepted Western paradigm of the 'perfect' and 'good' mother. Australian mummy-blogger come celeb-personality, Constance Hall, is a modern example of a mother who became known for her open and entertaining

discussions about motherhood on her online blog, *'Like a Queen'* (2010-19). Hall utilises online outlets to vent the difficulties of motherhood and expose unreasonable expectations of mothers set by patriarchal controls. Like Hall, more women are disclosing and celebrating the unembellished and private aspects of motherhood, often applying humour to regulate taboo aspects of mothering. This trajectory of women sharing stories contributes to changes in traditional assumptions about women, mothers and maternity.

The dominant visual depictions of motherhood in mainstream Western imagery, however, continue to perpetuate the stereotypical and idealised 'good' mother. Modern examples online, in film and television often promote mothers as 'super mums', who flawlessly juggle career, motherhood and home life whilst maintaining peak physical and emotional condition. Other stereotypes enclose motherhood as a sacred and privileged experience that endures only pure happiness and solace. This depiction of motherhood dismisses subjective female identity and confines women to a singular, static model that regulates female expansion. In other words, Motherhood is "...an oppressive institution that exists apart from mothers' lived experiences" (Harding 2016, 11). This limited representation is reproduced, transmitted and appropriated in popular media subsequently forming an icon of the 'good' mother in the collective Western imagination. Despite contemporary expectations, women are still subject to disadvantages such as the pay gap and employment gap. Women also continue to be under-supported with unequal distribution of parental obligation (Wilkinson 2007). "Mothers remain responsible for the majority of parenting and carry the weight of childhood development not held by fathers" (Wilkinson 2007, 7). The mother figure is, ad infinitum, bound to this representation and expected to selflessly conform to the mother role.

In counter culture, with the upsurge of second-wave feminism, women artists began using mediums such as photography as "...sites for reimagining new ways of being and beckoning previously unarticulated possibilities" (Liss 2009, xx). Thus, motherhood and maternity have become an area of critical and reflexive investigation. Within a patriarchal society, discourse about women and women's experiences, are often defined by a masculine perspective. This paradigm is particularly true in art history, where predominately male artists address the mother figure. West Australian photographer, Toni Wilkinson attests that "...art has contributed to the unequal distribution of power between males and females" and, "...therefore any discourse of art history needs to reflect that it offers a particular,

singular masculine perspective, which denies female subjectivity” (Wilkinson 2007, 12). In looking at examples of artworks within the historical canon of art, the representation of the mother has been constructed as an ideal Virgin Madonna, “...shaped as a category, that is, a patriarchal signifier, and not as a subject” (Katzav 2014, 299). Images of the Madonna and Child in Western art prevail as a putative symbol of motherhood. Traditionally in these examples, the mother is passive and gentle, lacking female sexuality, her primary sacred responsibility to put first the needs and desires of the child. Wilkinson believes, “depictions of the Virgin Madonna can never offer a powerful maternity that stands for multiple, complex and autonomous motherhood” (Wilkinson 2007, 11). Rather, these depictions embed a romanticised and sanitised vision that maintains the institution of motherhood as decided and controlled by a patriarchal system. As Oliver puts it, “...the cult of the virgin has been used in Western patriarchy in order to cover up the unsettling aspects of maternity and the mother child relationship” (Oliver quoted in Wilkinson 2007, 10). Unless presented in a romanticised and sanitised way (as seen in idyllic Renaissance paintings); pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and intimate mother/child relationships are aspects of the maternal experience not usually shared in public.

The influence of Madonna and Child iconography has developed putative visual stereotypes of the mother that are reproduced in popular media. Mothers are presented as “...gracious beings, benevolent, caring and almost holy” (Bright 2009, 3), restricted to the sanctity of their role as a definitive and loving carer. Recurring examples in art history “...reveals the presence of the maternal image mainly as bearing significance for the Other, not as creating meaning of the maternal subject herself” (Katzav 2014, 299). This singular depiction of the mother as carer has arisen from social order within a patriarchal system where mothers are expected to be solely responsible for raising their children. Feminist theorist Griselda Pollock argues, “art history is not just indifferent to women; it is a masculinity discourse, party to the social construction of sexual difference” (Pollock 2003 [1998], 11). The aim of this project is to consider and evaluate contemporary feminist theory and practice with the intention to visit and reclaim representations of motherhood and the maternal bond as multifaceted and complex. “The concept of feminist motherhood... strategically revalues certain traditional characteristics of the maternal, such as nurturance, care, empathy, and passion and projects these supposedly ‘sentimental’ maternal traits outside their previously limited range” (Liss 2009, xxi). *Au nom de la mère* combines photography with a feminist theoretical

lens to traverse and transgress the singular and outdated model of motherhood and maternal relationships. I use photography as a vehicle to intimately and provocatively expose my own experience and understanding about motherhood and the associated profound maternal bonds.

Photography is a powerful tool that is paradoxically intimate and explicative, an apparatus for both introspection and cultural analysis. "...Photography as a critical thinking device fits into a larger context of women employing photography to better understand their identities, relationships, and roles" (Harding 2016, 109). For feminist photographers the camera is a tool that allows the opportunity to capture an intimate view of the maternal subject. Julia Margaret Cameron, one of the first recognised female photographers, used the camera in this way. At the forefront of edgy and artistic photographic portraiture in the Victorian era, Cameron was an amateur photographer who created theatrical tableaux of the mother/daughter dyad (McCaroll Cutshaw 2010). Her approach allowed for a feminist view that deviated from the traditional representations of conservative Victorian values. Often her photographs imitated and subverted conventions of Madonna and Child imagery. Her Madonnas were sensual and emotional and adopted formal devices from Renaissance art (Bright 2013) to conform to traditions of high art yet celebrate the female subject's power and agency. Cameron, by way of her photography, and within the context of the rise of feminism in the 19th and 20th centuries, instigated and contributed to a significant movement toward artists exploring the everyday realities of family lives, maternal relationships and experiences.

Dorothea Lange is a prominent American female photographer of the early 20th Century who used the camera to re-visualise motherhood from a feminine perspective. Lange's iconic photograph *Migrant Mother* (1936) not only documents the degree of human suffering during the Great Depression in America but also reinvents the Madonna motif to reclaim subjectivity for women and mothers. The mother subject in the photograph represents inherent maternal values to keep children safe yet also "...suggests motherhood as an ordeal rather than a blessing" (Wilkinson 2007, 8). In comparison to traditional Madonna imagery – where the maternal figure is depicted as natural and soft, gently cradling her child in her arms – the mother subject in *Migrant Mother* is more ambiguous. As one of the "...most circulated images in history" (Bright 2013, 11), *Migrant Mother* powerfully imparts and acknowledges the complex dualities of motherhood; trauma and passion, love and loss.

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Figure 1: Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*. 1936, Gelatin silver print, 28.3 x 21.8cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Reproduced from MoMA. Reproduced from MoMA website.

Madonna and child iconography are comparably reworked to probe accepted depictions of motherhood in Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #216* (1989). Sherman's performative tableau *Untitled #216* directly imitates and mocks Jean Fouquet's classical painting, *Le Diptique de Melun* (1452) with an abject portrayal of Madonna and child. Sherman incorporates make-up, costume, prosthetics, sets and lighting to parody and probe the female stereotypes rendered in paintings of the Renaissance era. *Untitled #216* undermines the sacred, pure and natural representations of the mother subject rampant in art history. She directly satirises Fouquet's painting by awkwardly placing a prosthetic breast protruding from the female figure. Sherman's inclusion of 'unnatural' prosthetics ridicules romanticised versions of maternity and acknowledges the abject maternal.

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Figure 2: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #216*. 1989, Chromogenic colour print, 221.3 x 142.5 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Reproduced from MoMA.

Many contemporary women artists explore the abject as a means of dealing with the maternal subject. Julia Kristeva suggests “the symbolic realm of the abject maternal is as creative and life affirming as it is disgusting, horrifying, and unpredictable” (Caputi 1993, 5). This paradox is the complex realm of the maternal that many women artists work to reveal. Jenny Saville incorporates the maternal abject to critique stereotypes of femininity in Madonna and Child iconography. Saville re-appropriates Madonna and Child in her work, *The Mothers* (2011), reclaiming the female subjectivity of the maternal experience. Saville demands acknowledgement of the dichotomies of passion and trauma that come with the maternal experience. She uses a fleshy colour palate and chaotic brush strokes to develop an emotional rawness to the work. The image is abject, it simultaneously lures and revolts the viewer revealing maternity as both disturbing and powerful.

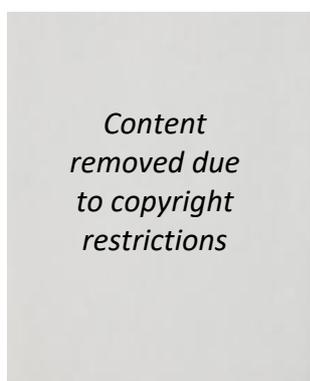


Figure 3: Jenny Saville. *The Mothers*. 2011, Oil and charcoal on canvas, 270 x 220 cm. Gagosian Gallery. Reproduced from Gagosian website.

Beyond the mother figure is the crucial relationship of mother and child. The difficult maternal feelings associated with mother/child bonds are another area of interest for contemporary female artists. “These feminine emotions... are not the soft and gentle once mythically constructed to keep women under control, but the potent and powerful kind that frighten and confuse with their ferocity and strength” (Bright 2009, 3). Joy Hester is a painter who uses a greyscale colour palate and rapid painting style to expose complex maternal feelings about the mother/child bond. Terror, fragility and deep passionate love are complex maternal polarities presented in Hester’s work *Mother and baby* (1955). In the painting the mother subject vigorously cradles the child, her eyes almost popping out of their sockets. The work reveals the intense and deep bonds that complicate the maternal experience. In comparison, Louise Bourgeois’ work titled *Maman* (1999), meaning ‘mummy’, is an enormous steel sculpture of a spider carrying ceramic eggs. The work embodies Bourgeois’

deeply felt pain associated with the death of her mother. Bourgeois employs the metaphor of the arachnid to represent the mother as a vulnerable and powerful female protector. Bourgeois practice allows her to navigate her intimate subjectivities about mother/child relationships from a daughter's perspective.

The artists discussed offer an alternative version of the mother figure and maternal bond, and "...claim back those complex feelings of mothering and lay them out for everyone to see" (Bright 2009, 3). These representations are ambiguous and complex allowing for multiple interpretations and readings. While I reject the static version of motherhood represented in Madonna iconography, like Saville and Sherman I cannot ignore it as a "...beacon of the maternal" (Wilkinson 2007, 12). The Madonna and child image "...is so pervasive over the centuries that any other representation of the mother/child relationship necessarily refers to it in order to depart from it" (Mirelle Astore quoted in Wilkinson 2007, 12). My work references conventions of Madonna imagery manipulating composition, lighting and colour to reinvent the mother/child dyad as a complex and vulnerable relationship. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 22* is a highly staged image that appropriates the tropes of Madonna imagery. I present my mother in a veil, drenched in a red hue light with a textured fabric blurring her exposed skin and breasts. Unlike traditional submissive Virgin Mary depictions, here my mother is presented as powerful and autonomous. The low camera angle and my mother's forward gaze distinguishes her maternal sovereignty and subverts the religious versions of the Madonna that dismiss female subjectivity.



Figure 4: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 22*. 2019. Digital photograph. Archived

Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 9 also subverts traditional Madonna imagery. The formal qualities of the image recall renaissance paintings of the Virgin Mary through colour, triangular composition and subject pose. However, the image depicts an ambiguous figure, a silhouette of colour masked by a layer of mist and mould. These visual elements create a sense of claustrophobia and imbues the image with a feeling of disquiet.



Figure 5: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 9*. 2019. Digital photograph. Archived

In more recent times, the ideal 'good' mother construction in imagery is historically embedded in the developments of the nuclear family – a traditional bourgeois entity that reflects a set of shared values and ideologies of social status, togetherness and stability. The nuclear family is defined by Daniela Cutas and Sarah Chan in *'Families: beyond the nuclear ideal'* (2012). It specifically requires “that children should be conceived naturally, born to and raised by their two young, heterosexual, married to each other, genetic parents; that this relationship between parents is also the ideal relationship between romantic sexual partners; and that romance and sexual intimacy ought to be at the core of our closest personal relationships” (Cutas and Chan 2012, 13). Feminist historian Deborah Chambers in *'Representing the Family'* (2001) describes the nuclear family model as “...flourishing as an ideal; a symbol, discourse, and powerful myth within collective imagination” (Chambers 2001, 1). Within this system, mothers are often promoted in mass media to preserve the “...refined, sanitised, symbolic construction of maternity” established in the early Madonna motifs of the Renaissance period. In these depictions, motherhood is interpreted as “...smiling women who managed to work, have children and be perfect partners all at once” (Bright 2013, 12). These images are a part of a well-known visual language that permeates art and other visual media, such as advertising, social and print media, film and television. Proliferated via these modes,

visions of motherhood lack complexity and vulnerability and display a version of motherhood and family that is inherently Anglo, stable and heterosexual. It is evident, however, that contemporary family experience and motherhood is increasingly divergent from the myth of the nuclear family. Family groupings such as multicultural, indigenous, blended, split, no children, single parent, and LGBTQI+ families to name a few, belong to our ever-growing sense of a postmodern familial identity (Chambers 2001). As in the past, these under-acknowledged, alternative notions of the family exist at the margins of 'society' and act as 'counterfoil' to the reign of the nuclear family and the 'good mother', a "permanent reminder of the need to fight for the perseveration of the ideal" (Chambers 2001, 66). With this in mind, I consciously use the camera to capture non-traditional representations of family as to create meaningful visualisations of a complex family experience.

As an artist and daughter raised by a single mother, I am inclined to share and celebrate alternative family experiences and filial relationships. I am interested in redefining boundaries where the "...nuclear family remains the normative model, and single-parent-headed families continue to be characterised in terms of 'deficits and disadvantages'" (Freeman 2017, 675). I employ the camera as a tool to wrestle with traditional depictions of family and expose new, more complex visualisations particular to the mother/child bond. To use Susan Bright's words here, I am "...not interested in the sentimental and humanist version of maternity, but the darker bonds which bind mother and child together" (Bright 2009, 3). I argue this is particularly important in single mother families where children develop deeper bonds with their primary carer. Art photography provides opportunities to re-visualise motherhood and the significance of the maternal relationship. "Art is tangibly a space for critique and critical distance, despite pressures and limits applied to it from a society" (Bate 2009, 131) and hence, art must work to produce new visual opportunities that may challenge and subvert accepted taboos and conventions about maternal experiences. My work takes on a reflexive view that exposes intimacies of my personal experience and simultaneously comments on greater social and political traditions.

Cast in the shadow of pioneering women artists such as Cameron, Lange, and Sherman, a younger generation of feminist practitioners have emerged within this more complex cultural and political zeitgeist. Maggie Nelson is a radical contemporary writer who also works towards progressive portrayals of alternative family forms based on her personal experience. In her auto-theory text, *'The Argonauts'* (2015), she provides an intimate depiction of a queer family exploring ideas of sexuality, gender, marriage and parenting within the context of a society used to the fixed boundaries of the nuclear family institution.

Catherine Opie is another renegade practitioner whose work traverses boundaries of convention to counter traditional discourses of family. Opie photographs poignant instances of Lesbian motherhood dismantling conservative western values that suggest children should be raised within a heterosexual nuclear family. The work *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004) explores ideas of maternity and identity, and is a "...reminder that she, as the photographer, does not stand apart from the group she documents" (Guggenheim 2005, para.1). Opie references the classical maternal pose as seen in depictions of Christian Madonnas, yet Opie's physical presentation denies all that is commonly affiliated with a traditional mother's appearance. Rather Opie reveals motherhood as an autonomous and potent experience that conquers the restrictions of idealised motherhood.



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Figure 6: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*. 2004, Chromogenic print, 101.6 x 78.7. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY. Reproduced from Guggenheim Museum website.

Sally Mann, Connie Petrillo and Elinor Carucci are important female photographers who continue to negotiate the traditions of women and family in photography. These women document their experiences and challenge dominant cultural perceptions. Their photography contravenes in "...knowledges and ideologies, which are dominant and have become normalised as common sense about art and artists, about women and societies" (Pollock 2003, 251). Notably, they highlight taboos relating to mothers and their children to agitate culturally embedded moral and ethical anxieties. Another pertinent example of a mother photographing her children is Toni Wilkinson. Her recent show, *Beyond here lies nothing* (2018) at Art Collective WA, is an exploration of maternal longing, loss and sexuality. Wilkinson, like Mann, Petrillo and Carucci work to dismantle and subvert limited depictions of childhood via photography.

I am influenced by photographers who work with their mothers and attempt to rewrite the maternal experience from the perspective of the child. Photographers Charlie Engman and Leigh Ledare subvert cultural assumptions of family and familial taboos. Although they respond to familial taboos differently, their work invites comparison. Both photograph their mothers in transgressive, intimate and suggestive situations, which are highly posed and performative. Their work responds to cultural histories and confronts Oedipal taboos with the intention to alter visual discourses about traditional mother/son relationships. Ledare's work is a reflection of his lived experience in an alternative family situation, where his mother raised him as a single parent. He says, "I never thought of the project as a portrait of her [mother]. Instead, it's a document of our family, centred on the problems she was bringing to the surface" (Leigh Ledare quoted in *In the studio: Leigh Ledare*, 2017, para. 7). Ledare's portraits reveal the self and paradoxically reflect his concerns about his maternal bond. Comparatively, Engman establishes his mother as a muse in highly stylised tableaux's that echo the conventions of fashion photography. For example, in Figure 7, Engman celebrates his ageing mother as a sexual and youthful woman. His images are not so much reflective of his experience of the family; instead they question, and probe accepted ideas of beauty, sexuality, maternal desire and Oedipal relationships that exist in the parameters of traditional family ideology.



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Figure 7: Charlie Engman, *Untitled (Mom Series)*. 2018. Digital Image. Reproduced from MAP website.

In the contemporary examples I have discussed, the photographic medium allows for intimate and reflexive explorations of the complex maternal experience. It is clear that artist photographers today understand the polarity and paradoxical capacity of the photographic medium. Susan Bright effectively articulates how these photographers work to exploit the photographic medium for its power and potency as a critical thinking device. Bright asserts, “fully aware of photography’s expectations but also of its limitations, these artists revel in contradiction and ambiguity, embrace the performative aspect of their practice, and, crucially, foreground the role of subjectivity and self-referentiality” (Bright 2013, 10). I embrace Bright’s description as applying to my photographic practice. Using my camera, I attempt to deviate from sentimental and sanitised visions of motherhood and mother/daughter relationships to promote the maternal experience as intimate, complex, unstable and precious.

This project illuminates real and unguarded vision of maternity drawing on my own maternal experiences as a daughter. Primarily raised by my single mother, I have firsthand experience in an unconventional family structure. What I experienced – single mother, low income, multiple partners and arranged paternal visits – is usually discarded from histories and visual depictions of family. Using photography to document the mother/child relationship I hope to expose “...the unique mother/child bond that is set up in pregnancy and recognises the maternal capacity to love the other in the self” (Wilkinson 2007, 7). I photograph my mother using the camera to explore my sense of self within the uncertain and complex spheres of contemporary family experience. I expose alternative and intimate visions of the mother that are omitted from mainstream imagery and the dominant, shared western cultural imagination.

Chapter Two: French feminism and psychoanalysis: re-defining motherhood through an auto-ethnographic approach

The way I work as a female photographer in the 21st Century is central to my methodology. I see myself as a practitioner influenced by the feminist mantra, 'the personal is political'. This statement is the nucleus of the feminist movement and encourages reflection on subjective experiences to explore questions and assumptions about self and identity particularly in relation to female roles in society. The following discussion examines French feminist theory and contemporary feminist thought to support my auto-ethnographic photographic approach. This lens sharpens my personal accounts of the mother/daughter relationship and the maternal bond.

Feminist ethnographies look at "what is missing, what is passed over, and what is avoided" (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 2012, 6). It is the minor narratives omitted and dismissed within hierarchal structures that feminist practitioners consciously and pointedly embrace. The Postmodern movement of the late 20th century stimulated a wave of practitioners who used art to wrestle with and critique boundaries and assumptions about art and culture. A feminist perspective expands on Postmodern theory "...by placing women and their lives and experiences at the center of inquiry" (Gaudelius 1993, 8). Postmodernism, feminism and the contemporary art context provide a space where women photographers and feminist-inclined photographers celebrate the feminine experience as a passage to female stories usually discarded from histories. Clare Raymond explains, "... if a photograph advocates feminism – if it alters or rearranges the sensible; if it changes what we know of the sensed world, our politics, our knowledge of community – then it carries a feminist aesthetic" (Raymond 2017, 8). It is this female aesthetic that explores intimate and palpable representations that agitate concrete visualisations of motherhood and allow for an emancipated and empowered female autonomy.

I consciously employ a feminist aesthetic with an auto-ethnographic approach that recalls personal experiences and subjectivities. This approach "... takes people as active, knowing subjects rather than as passive objects of study" (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 2012, 7). It "...requires an active and collaborative rather than passive role of the researcher" (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 2012, 3).

The intimate feelings and shared experiences inherent in the mother/daughter relationship become manifest through the process of photographing my mother. The

history of our relationship influences the actions and considerations of our roles as photographer and subject respectively. As an educated and experienced artist, my mother is aware of the command of the camera, the careful construction of images, and the relations at play between photographer, subject and viewer. She actively participates in the construction of my images bringing her understanding and love of art into her role as model. For example, in *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) #19* she draws from her experiences of life drawing, where models pose in stylised and exaggerated ways. Her forward body language and direct gaze presents her as comfortably at one with her maternal power. This collaborative process reflects the evolving dynamics of our relationship, both as mother and daughter, artist and photographer.

In the photographic book *'The Notion of Family'* (2014), American photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier uses her camera to expose the economic decline and inherent racism of her hometown Braddock, Pennsylvania USA. Frazier does so via the subjects of her mother and grandmother. In this way her work is both personal and political revealing her intimate subjectivities about her womanhood, intergenerational mother/daughter relationships and the political histories relevant to racial and economic injustices of their experience living in America. "...Frazier reinforces the idea of art and image-making as a transformative act, a means of resetting traditional power dynamics and narratives – both those of her family and of the community at large" (Aperture Magazine 2020, para.1) Particularly relevant in Frazier's work, is her experience photographing her mother and grandmother, "...employing the camera as a potent vehicle of self-expression and self-possession" (Berger 2014, para.9). Her mother and grandmother are active participants, open to the scrutiny of the camera as a means to reveal stories and produce knowledge about woman's experiences in relation to social and cultural issues. In the images, the women pose together creating emotionally rich portraits that reveal the strength and resilience of the maternal relationship specific to daughterhood.

My mother doesn't always have control of how she is represented. As per the collaborative process, she allows me to direct her. I intentionally construct images of my mother in suggestive poses and private settings that reference or appropriate my lived experience but are also visions of the family not usually shared in public. The portraits are carefully composed and depict intimate moments that may evoke in the viewer a degree of voyeuristic discomfort. Jane Gallop argues photography has always been about showing and sharing the private, yet an intimate depiction of the

family “can also produce shame by exhibiting privates that shouldn’t be seen in public” (Gallop 2003, 34). This fissure between concepts of what should and should not be shared publicly, as defined by cultural taboos and traditions, is the complex liminal space of which I, and many contemporary photographers before me, work to interrogate. My portraits are ambiguous and intimate and evocatively expose familiar and private scenes. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 18* is an image of my mother’s legs, her skin and dermis exposed. Her legs rest on a chenille fabric amplifying the soft and fleshy tactility of the image. The photograph is of a private nature, capturing an element of the female maternal body not usually shared in public. By closely photographing my mother’s legs and showing them in public I am confronting cultural proscriptions about the intimacy of the mother/daughter relationship, women and women’s bodies and demanding a revision of what is acceptable to be shown and shared.



Figure 8: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 18*. 2019. Digital photograph. Archived.

In the essay ‘*Stabat Mater*’ (1977) Julia Kristeva poetically articulates her intimate subjectivities about her experience of motherhood while reflecting on accepted cultural conventions that dismiss motherhood to be a natural and revered experience. In other words, “Kristeva manages to articulate simultaneously one’s woman’s lived experience and to question dominant systems of inscribed meaning that attempt to define a restrict woman” (Gaudelius 1993, 15). Kristeva confronts cultural notions that motherhood is sacred and natural. She uses poetic and descriptive language to reveal the difficult realities and powerful dichotomies of maternal experience. She writes, “...maternity along its borders destines us to experience a frenzied ecstasy to which by chance the nursing’s laugh responds in the sunlit ocean’s waters” (Kristeva, 1985 [1977], 146). The original ‘*Sabat Mater*’ from the 13th century is a Christian hymn which was written to demonstrate the

suffering of Mother Mary during Jesus Christ's crucifixion. Kristeva re/works the impetus of the hymn in her essay, also exploring elements of pain and suffering ensnared in the maternal experience. Kristeva's '*Sabat Mater*' is an example of early feminist practice that endorses an intimate female voice to critique instilled cultural traditions. Kristeva encourages feminist practitioners to use creative endeavours as an avenue to investigate repressed and challenging realities of feminine experience. Like '*Sabat Mater*', feminist-inclined, creative actions have the power to disturb embedded cultural assumptions about women and women's histories.

My mother explored feminist ideas of maternity and motherhood in her own arts practice during pregnancy and after the birth of my brother and I. She practiced painting, drawing, sculpture and digital media as avenues to understand and explore the complex feelings related to motherhood and maternity. In particular, art making was a way of dealing with her experience of post-natal depression and dissatisfaction with the distribution of parenting responsibilities between her and my father. Art and creative endeavour may provide feminist practitioners an outlet for recognising sexed inequality and agitating these embedded structures within the cultural milieu. Through my research, I have discovered the difficulties my mother faced as a single parent. Art practice facilitated a space to work through and probe these complex feelings and has inspired me to investigate and reconsider motherhood and my experience of the maternal.

Feminist critique provides a space for multilayered interpretation and subjectivity. It aims to dismantle patriarchal ideology without demanding a hierarchy of feminist ideas. French feminist trio Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray demonstrate this policy in their modifications of Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis. Feminist psychoanalysis as developed by the trio, "...via a French detour... can provide feminism with a means of understanding the implication of the political in the personal rather than just being another patriarchal discourse" (Jane Gallop quoted in Gaudelius 1993, 63). The trio re-worked the writings of Freud and Lacan during the 1980's and 90's to reflect the cultural shift which fosters female subjectivity and mandates re-conception of the maternal.

Traditional psychoanalysis privileges the masculine in the Oedipus complex and Symbolic order. It "...assumes that cultural meaning requires the repression of that primary relationship to the maternal body" (Butler 1989, 105). Testified in Freud and Lacan's analysis are the assertions that identity development occurs in recognition

of difference to the male. The pre-oedipal or pregnancy stage is dismissed as natural “pre-culture” and therefore insignificant in the development of human sexed identity.

“Sexuality is based on a masculine norm privileging phallic sexuality with it's consequent devalued and castrated account of the feminine... Hence, women's position in the symbolic order is determined by lack and the only positions open to women are male-defined”

(Allmark 2003, 11)

Psychoanalysis and Feminism offers a critical discourse which allows for an understanding of power dynamics in Western culture within the confines of sexual difference. “The feminin economy gives space for, and recognition of, the other. It is an opportunity to move beyond the segregation of binaries and it attempts to dissolve the hierarchies that exist” (Allmark 2003, 36). Feminism and psychoanalysis provide an acute insight into the restrictions imposed on women by paternal law which are grounded on sexual difference and continue to be accepted in the 21st century. The feminist and psychoanalytic principles developed by the trio are important imperatives especially when investigating the maternal. However, I recognise these theories have limitations too. As Toni Wilkinson notices, “not all mothers, feminists, or all women share the exact beliefs, values or feelings”, thus, “...the incorporation of theories from a Western feminist recount of psychoanalysis, which reflects a white middle-class approach to sexual difference, is not representative of all women's experience” (Wilkinson 2012, 12). Accordingly, I model my methodology to negotiate the layered and complex discourses in psychoanalytical and feminist theory and embed this research as the contextual framework for my work.

I fuse feminism, psychoanalysis and my personal subjectivities and meld an intimate creative position that I hope bares critical, thoughtful and loving examination and may transcend confines of gender, class and race. To support this process, I draw on Judith Gardiner's ideas from *'In the name of the mother: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Methodology'* (2008). Gardiner explains methodology based on feminism and psychoanalysis, “...it is not an authorization for her as an individual who claims to represent the universal but rather a collective or personal-as-political re-authorisation in which the critic permits herself to speak in her own voice” (Gardiner 2008, 244). She adds, a feminist methodology based on psychoanalysis

is a “de-authorisation of established authors and a re-authorisation of ourselves” (Gardiner 2008, 244). As Gardiner suggests, I frame my work in the context of critical feminist thought from the French trio and expand on their ideas to develop an autobiographical body of work. I attune a voice that is authentic and modest yet robust and evocative. I reconceptualise the mother “...not as an all-powerful phallic female or an ever-giving plenitude but as a more provisional figure, unstable and divided but active and attentive” (Gardiner 2008, 244).

Chapter Three: The significance of the mother/daughter bond

French feminist theory muscles for recognition of female subjectivity in identity development. Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray expand on patriarchal psychoanalysis, suggesting signification occurs during pregnancy and in the child's relationship with the mother before separation. They work to reconceive the maternal relationship as the first connection that establishes and shapes the construction of self. Julie Rosewarne in *'Interpretive Frames: Feminism, psychoanalysis and art history'* (2000) conceives that; "...feminist critique opened onto powerful subjectivity of the mother, when she is possibly most influential in her infant's life" (Rosewarne 2000, 32). Stimulated by the psychoanalytical crux of feminist theory, I seek to expose the maternal relationship as significant and potent. The primary relationship is essential in developing my own sense of self and intricate psyche. I mine the intimacy of the mother/child bond and draw multifaceted and challenging imagery that subverts notions of motherhood as decided by paternal law constructs. "...The ability to reflect on the significance maternity does not rely solely on the experience of being a mother" (Wilkinson 2003, 22). My perspective as a daughter, as a female, and as an artist connects as well as reflects my relationship with my mother and the maternal. My "camera is an extension of my subjectivity" (Allmark 2017, 4). I utilise it as an instrument to explore my experience of the maternal and my single mother upbringing. It becomes an intimate tool that reveals *'Heretics'* and the power and potency of the mother/daughter bond.

'Heretics' is an outlaw ethics developed by Julia Kristeva that recognises the unique mother/child bond that is set up in pregnancy. It acknowledges "...the potential for satisfaction when one can embrace the other as oneself through identification with the mother" and "...binds the subject to the other through love and not the law" (Oliver 1993 quoted in Wilkinson 2003, 23). I expose the significance of the maternal relationship from a daughter's perspective. I visualise a deep and powerful bond between mother and daughter, one that is at the same time strong, vulnerable, terrifying and powerful. I unite *'Heretics'* and the photographic portrait to visualise the potential for love and loss in the maternal bond. I take an outlaw ethical approach to accept and celebrate the repressed *Other*. In furthering the female aesthetic and representation I aim to expose the omitted visualisations of motherhood and mother/child relationships by producing abundant, complex and challenging works that reveal hidden truths and experiences.

Chapter Four: Reclaiming the mother/daughter bond through photography: complex, intimate and abundant

As a daughter, I am particularly interested in perceptions of the mother/daughter dyad as I work closely with my mother portraying intimate instances of the unique filial relationship. In western culture and history, patriarchal discourses dismiss mother daughter relationships as significant to female development, psyche and soma. In turn, mainstream representations of the mother/daughter relationship ignore female complexity, subjectivity and autonomy. Combining French feminist theory, *'Heretics'* and a *'photographie feminine'* approach as part of my methodology, my photographs offer an alternative image of the contemporary mother/daughter relationship. The series of photographs presents multilayered visions of the mother/daughter bond which celebrate its abundant and diverging intricacies and complexities.

In *'Side by Side: reinventing mother daughter relationships'* (2003), Sandi Holzgraefe points out "...the relationship between mothers and daughters is one of the most basic to feminism, mainly because dealing with our own mother, many of us could be confronting our own misogyny – our dislike for the way women's power is forced to play out in sexist society" (Holzgraefe 2003, 132). In particular, "...mother/daughter discourses have stressed struggle and separation, and almost exclusively defined mother/daughter relationships within rigid psychological dichotomies – love/hate, proximity/distance, autonomy/dependence" (Holzgraefe 2003, 2). These dichotomies that ensnare female relationships within societal norms, disregard the complexity and abundance of the mother/daughter dyad and perpetuate misogynistic variations of motherhood. It is for this reason that feminist scholars and creative practitioners concerned with motherhood must work to question, reassess and correct misogynistic defined variations of the mother daughter bond.

I use the camera with both love and interrogation to investigate and reclaim the mother/daughter bond. Encouraged by recent feminist practice, in particular the adaptation of Panizza Allmarks' intimate *'photographie feminine'* approach, I point my lens at my mother and position the audience to closely inspect and reconsider the mother/daughter bond. As Andrea O'Reilly describes in *'Mothers, daughters and feminism today: empowerment, agency, narrative and motherline'*, "told and retold, stories between mothers and daughters allow us to define female experience outside of phallogentric narrative of patriarchy" (O'Reilly 1994, 4). My camera

facilitates an intimate gendered story telling which explores the complex traces of the maternal experience of mother and daughter.

Feminist author Adrienne Rich notably wrote in the book, 'Of Women Born: motherhood as experience and institution' (1976), "the cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story" (Rich 1976 [1977], 225). While since the 1970s, mother/daughter relationships have garnered greater attention, it is the conventional and institutionalised versions of the mother/daughter dyad that are retold and re-presented. The mother/daughter relationship is constructed and viewed in terms of its relation to men, "...therefore most of what passes between woman and her daughter (or daughter and her mother) ...falls outside the acknowledged social context of men-women relationship" (Hammer 1976 quoted in Bromberg 2008, 78). Rich investigated and rallied for recognition of the mother daughter bond beyond masculine defined cultural assumptions and discourse which, circumscribe to strict binaries and refuse feminine complexity, autonomy and ambiguity. "Knowledges about the self, about mothering, about childhood, about the mother-daughter relationship... are produced and reproduced in specific relations of social and political power, and in response to specific social and political preoccupations" (Lawler 2002, 3). This lack of recognition informs my practice and the desire to activate the real and perceived taboos and boundaries of the mother/daughter bond. As a feminist practitioner I am compelled to engage in a creative investigation to re-tell and re-present the mother/daughter narrative. The photographic medium and the revealing nature of the photographic portrait genre is a powerful outlet to explore new visualisations of female autonomy and subjectivity.

The intimacy of the photographic portrait allows me to capture the synergy between photographer, subject and viewer. As Rich poignantly said, "...there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other" (Rich 1976 [1977], 225). It is this flow of energy that Rich articulates that I want the audience to sense when viewing my photographs and considering the mother/daughter bond. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 2* captures my mother passing by a doorframe, frozen in time between spaces. The charge of energy captured in the moment flows between subject, photographer and viewer and unravels embedded uncertainties of my experience inviting contemplation of contemporary mother/daughter bonds.



Figure 9: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 2*. 2019. Digital photograph. Archived.

Prominent American photographer Tierney Gearon is an artist exploring similar territory. Her representations of family investigate taboos relating to motherhood and intimate filial relationships. In the photographic series, *The Mother Project* (2001), Gearon examines her feelings of passion and trauma, love and neglect that underline the complex relationship she shares with her mother. Susan Bright describes the series as, "...not simply pictures of her mother but images of a relationship between mother and daughter, of coming to terms with established maternal expectations, and of assuming and then reversing accepted familial roles" (Bright date, 21). Combining documentary and art photography conventions, Gearon photographs her mother in carefully staged and cleverly composed moments of mother/daughter interaction. The imagined moments, paradoxically loving and interrogative, refuse conventional filial roles and demand viewers to reconsider the bounds of mother/daughter relationships. For example, the image *Untitled* (2001) from *The Mother Project*, captures Gearon and her mother embracing in a passionate kiss, a confronting scene in consideration of taboos about women and intimate female relationships.



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Figure 10: Tierney Gearon. 2001. *Untitled*. C-type print, 50.8 x 76.2. Reproduced from The New Yorker website.

In masculine Western discourse, “women are made taboo to women – not just sexually, but as comrades, cocreators, conspirators. In breaking this taboo, we are reuniting with our mothers; in reuniting with our mothers, we are breaking this taboo” (Rich 1977 [1976], 255). Creative work allows for powerful and subjective reconsideration of the mother/daughter bond and re/presents mother/daughter relationships as complex, vigorous and abundant. Sian Davey is another female photographic artist who redefines mother/daughter relationships and taboos by photographing her teenage daughter in the series *Martha* (2018). Davey subverts stereotypes of mother/daughter relationships as she positions herself and her camera amongst her daughter’s adolescent social scene. Davey and her camera do not impose on the scene or teenage subjects. Rather, her camera is an omniscient onlooker creating an intimacy between photographer, subject and viewer which allows for reconsideration of the mother/daughter bond and refuses institutionalised ideas that condemn taboo mother/teen intimacy.

In recognition of these female practitioners and their maternal musings, my project, *Au nom de la mère* is my contribution to the continuing discourse that reinvents and subverts the dominant male gaze. “One way for women to create new and separate personal myths may be to pay homage to the women, especially the mothers who came before, to acknowledge the mothers’ personal experiences and how those experiences influence and shape daughter’s personal identities” (Hakimzadeh 2015, 25). Paying homage to my own mother, I aim to celebrate all mothers and the unique mother/child bond set up in pregnancy. Uniting photography and Julia Kristeva’s *‘Heretics’*, I embrace the powerful bond of mother and child and capture intimate moments of a creative collaboration between mother and daughter. “By restructuring our acceptance of certain mother/daughter concepts and paradigms,

which are often destructive to these relationships, we can reconstruct the possibility of the mother/daughter intimacy and continuity” (Holzgraefe 2003, 131). The photographic series is both personal and political as it works to seek a more varied and comprehensive analysis and representation of the mother/daughter dyad that interrogates and celebrates the passion and trauma of mothers and daughters.

Chapter Five: An intimate and auto-ethnographic approach to photography

Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock argues "...if the dominant pacification of populations takes place through passive consumption of meanings naturalised through realist modes of representation, feminist critical practice must resist such secularity" (Pollock 1998, 246). Accordingly, feminist practitioners must endeavour to offer space that allows for alternative discourses that disrupt hierarchal structures defined by dominant cultural ideologies and assumptions. Hélène Cixous developed a feminist writing style that acknowledges gendered subjectivity. 'L'écriture féminine' speaks and writes the body, recognising female repression and the need to write themselves. Cixous believes the "...subversive power of a 'feminine' text offers a serious challenge to patriarchy" (Gaudelius 1993, 41). Yvonne Gaudelius (1993) clarifies;

"Cixous has called the type of writing "feminine" not because it is the type of writing that women do (or that women's bodies enable them to do) but because it exists as outside writing to tradition. This tradition is one that is dominated by a relationship to the other that is based on hierarchy, and ultimately on an erasure of the other"

(Gaudelius 1993, 41)

To embody feminine experience and employ the camera as an ethnographic writing tool the photographer "...shows what she sees and also shows what she refuses" (Raymond 2017, 9). I am consciously showing my alternative and private experiences of the maternal, which concurrently reject dominant visual traditions of representations of motherhood. Through photographic "writing the body", I visualise my creative relationship with my mother, in which we work collaboratively to expose unconventional aspects of mother/daughter relationships. "Placing ourselves in our inquiry, feminists have sought methods of inquiry which incorporate a standpoint which intervenes in an androcentric formation of knowledge...Inherent feminist theory is the recognition that this theory is not going to provide all the answers"(Gaudelius 1993, 13). I visualise my experience of the maternal as a daughter and also reflect on the taboos and regulations relating to representations of motherhood and mother/daughter intimacy.

The images of my mother traverse boundaries and disclose fluid and ambiguous maternal experience. "Fluidity offers the potential to resist models of stability, which claims heterosexuality, patriarchy and western ideology as its origin" (Allmark 2003,

32). *'Photographie féminine'*, derived from Hélène Cixous' concept *'L'écriture féminine'* allowed Allmark to develop a feminine "writing of the body" that employs a photographic language. It is an approach that combines French feminist theory with an embodied feminine experience and supports the navigation of gendered subjectivities and lived experience of the family via the instrument of photography (Allmark 2003). Allmark predicates a feminist methodology engages with an "intimate, embodied approach" (Allmark 2009, 276). It is a sensory experience that negotiates the relationship between feminine experience and artistic perception as a photographer. Traces of the photographer's body and subjectivities are present in the work produced. "*Photographie féminine*, entailing a woman's embodied subjectivity, is self-reflexive and empowering in its documentation of lived experiences" (Allmark 2003, 11).

Au nom de la mère articulates the sensory experience of my relationship with my mother, particularly referencing instances of my upbringing and the feelings of loss that emerged from the split of my parents. In delving into the subjectivities of both nostalgic and difficult memories of my mother, I deploy costume and setting to weave complex feelings of love and loss associated with the mother/daughter bond. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) #17* pictures my mother in a pink dressing gown. I asked my mother to wear her dressing gown for the photograph, the same gown she has worn since I was a child. For me, the gown is at once comforting and confronting. It conjures fond memories of my mother wearing the gown on weekends after long sleep-ins, making pancakes in the kitchen. It also evokes difficult memories in which her gown cloaked her nude body after nights spent with new boyfriends. Via the lens, these intimate explorations imbue the image with a synergy that may allow for multilayered meaning and contribute to versify images of mothers in contemporary image culture.

According to Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Deborah Piatelli in *'The Synergistic Practice of Theory and Method'* 2012, feminist research methods "...call for more participatory, reflexive approaches to knowledge construction." (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 2012, 17). Showing and sharing alternative visions of the maternal counters traditional and stereotypical images of mothers and maternal relationships. Leigh Ledare works collaboratively with his mother in order to reflect their lived experiences and intimate subjectivities about the maternal relationship. His project *'Pretend You're Actually Alive'* 2008, spanned over eight years and documented the many layers of a synergy between life and art. Ledare's project questions social and

cultural taboos about womanhood, female sexuality, motherhood and maternal relationships. In an interview with Leigh Ledare by Louisiana Channel in 2013, Ledare revealed it was his mother who was often in control of how she was represented in the photographs. He explains, “In a sense she is submitting me to a certain set of conditions, projecting on to me a kind of identity... or sort of persona of inappropriate desire that I then take on in the work” (Louisiana Channel 2013, 03:21). Further, he acknowledges “that’s to say there’s a sort of knowingness of my own position, there’s a self-reflection to my own position in relation to the making of all of these images” (Louisiana Channel 2013, 04:00). Like Ledare, I account for my engagement and position when creating my work while accepting or rejecting my mother’s influence. The subjectivities, experiences, and memories of our relationship are activated and charge the images with an emotional content that, more often than not, takes me by surprise.

I am a daughter photographing my mother and in particular, bringing “...a feminine aesthetic of photography that resonates with feminine embodied experiences” (Allmark 2009, 276). My feminist aesthetic is self-reflexive, fluid and ambiguous. As defined in *Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics* (2017), feminist aesthetics are active, rather than a concrete force, “an occurrence of a kind of motion, a force with which the image or thing seen, crosses to affect, and deeply alter the one who sees” (Raymond 2017, 3). My practice is about fostering a reflexive view of my family, of setting up the possibility that the active motion of constructing an image will possibly “alter the one who sees” (Raymond 2017, 3). By ethnographically exposing alternative and intimate viewpoints of parent/child relationships, I may prompt the viewer to re-evaluate their personal or cultural assumptions. This approach allows for meaning in my work that is not forceful, nor omniscient but rather multilayered, fluid and potent. The potential ambiguity and tension offer possibilities that transcend accepted norms of female sexuality and representations of motherhood.

Chapter Six: Photography and the maternal

The photographic medium is significant to my research due to its theoretical tie to the maternal and childbirth. “[A photograph] is a trace, a remnant, of the person who was there. The trace is tactile, like a footprint, or perhaps more accurately like a navel” (Olin 2002, 100). In *‘Camera Lucida’* [1980] (2000), Roland Barthes proposes an inherent relationship between photography and the maternal. Barthes suggests that the act of viewing a photograph conjures a universal, unconscious, emotional and bodily experience that recalls the separation from the mother at birth. Kaila Howell in *‘Time, Loss and the Death of the (M)other in Roland Barthes Camera Lucida and Sally Mann’s Deep South’* (2015) explains Barthes theory. She elaborates, “...the photograph serves to reconnect the viewer with the (M)other, symbolically re-attaching him or her to the time before birth when the umbilical cord was still attached” (Howell 2015, 106). For Barthes, photography invokes memory of the original trauma via the element of the *punctum*; “...it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out like an arrow, and pierces me” (Barthes 2000 [1980], 26). The *punctum*, unique to each viewer “pricks” and “bruises”. It is the element of a photograph that is poignant to the viewer (Barthes 2000 [1980]).

In *‘Camera Lucida’* Barthes describes a photograph he found of his mother that held such significance *‘Winter Garden Photograph’* inspired his exposition of photography’s penetrating element – the *punctum*. As readers, we are never shown the *‘Winter Garden Photograph’* because Barthes “...is well aware that its symbolic, private meaning would be lost on us” (Mcarroll Cutshaw 2010, 9). Barthes’ argument is that the poignancy of a photograph and a photograph’s meaning is made when it is viewed and interpreted. Each meaning inferred, depends on the personal histories, experiences and subjectivities of each independent viewer. Following *Camera Lucida*, other photographic theorists have expanded on Barthes’ ideas drawing metaphoric parallels which intertwine photography, *punctum* and the maternal. Esther Teichmann in *‘Falling into photography’* (2011), describes the photograph as having the “...magical, maternal and uncanny ability to procreate”, revealing “...an unmistakable reanimation of that which has been lost” (Teichmann 2011, 23). Teichmann continues to say that, “...every photograph serves to remind us of our collective loss of the (M)other and consequent loss of any capacity to share direct experience with an/other” (Howell 2015, 79). In viewing a photograph, the trauma from this original experience (the separation from the mother) is recollected and reveals a loss and longing for the maternal body and connection

with the Other. With this in mind, I suggest, taking a photograph may reconnect us with this this first primary experience and facilitate re-joining with the mother.

Creative production and the maternal are intrinsically connected. Teichmann suggests, "...the positive force of creative production is... founded upon desire, born out of pain and loss, the artist a technician of melancholia...bound to the maternal...to homesickness, loss, desire, love and the abject" (Teichmann 2011, 20). Therefore, the act of photography as a creative practice may allow for reconnection with the maternal and as such the mother. This is significant to my work, which embodies my subjective experience - pain, loss, love and desire - and functions to reconnect me with my mother. Here, I work "...from within the maternal realm, this semiotic space bound to the most archaic memories linked to the maternal body... and with it, the risk of losing one's self, an acknowledgment of the instability of identity" (Teichmann 2011, 20). *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 27* particularly reflects my feminine experience and artistic perception, traces of subjectivity are layered in the work. The image reveals my feelings about my mother's mortality. I photograph her lying on the bed recalling a scene of a funeral and an open casket. These feelings of fear and loss imbued in the image resonate to universal feelings between mothers and daughters.



Figure 11: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 27*. 2019. Digital photograph. Archived.

Subjective exploration of maternal experience is a crucial element of forming knowledge (Teichmann 2011) and thus integral to my artistic critique. My work attempts to reveal "knowledge" through visualising intimate and subjective experiences. My photography endeavours, not to assume facts or the truth, but rather to envision intimate stories and transform conventional ways of seeing motherhood.

“...Knowledge is not based upon photographic evidence, but rather its opposite, the unpredictable and uncontrollable sense of recognition. An involuntary, yet nonetheless certain reading of the image occurs, in which the photograph is no longer representative, but rather presents a truth outside of its indexical status, photography here becoming something other than its ability to record and document the visible and knowable. And within this utopic photographic space that the image is connected to the maternal. It is this non-referential, transformative and haunting aspect of the photographic, which allows us to see another truth, another reality”

(Teichmann 2011, 50)

A photograph is an “isolated two-dimensional fragment of the world. This concentrated frame draws connections between unrelated objects and people. Connections which don’t necessarily exist in reality” (Carroll 2015, 39). For example, spiral or labyrinth patterns reoccur throughout my photographic work as symbols of the complex feelings associated with the maternal bond and the circle of life. I photograph a framed image of me as a child, an image my mother has had by her bedside since I can remember. The inclusion of this archive is a reminder of the power of the photographic portrait “...the evidentiary or objective function of photography [is linked] with erotics in its capacity as a vessel for love longing and loss” (McCarroll Cutshaw 2010, 9). This love, longing and loss experienced by both my mother and I, and captured in the documentation of the archive, is enhanced by the spiralling fabric in the background. The labyrinth symbol is reoccurred in *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 20*, an image of a glowing 1970’s hotplate. Known as the ‘Hopi’ symbol in Native American cultures, the labyrinth represents the umbilical cord and enduring maternal return. The inner circle can be seen as the amniotic sac in which we began, then outward spirals signify the circle of life. It is the careful consideration of these elements and patterns within the work that reveals the potential of the photographic medium to construct and reveal meaning throughout the project and develops polarity and intimacy in the viewing experience.



Figure 12 : Olive Lipscombe *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 21 and 20*. 2019. Digital photographs. Archived.

Marianne Hirsch explains, work that integrates “various forms of intersubjective negotiation of sameness and difference, mutuality and misidentification, mirroring and distraction creates images that we readers must surround with narratives drawn from our own experiences” (Hirsch 1997, 164). Careful and strategic curation in my work introduces parallels, polarity and tension. As a result, my photography may permit viewers to reflect on the complexity and uncertainty of their own maternal experiences. I juxtapose *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 11* and *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 12* because they work aesthetically together. The facial expression and tight inward body language of my mother, juxtaposed with the segment of flesh captured in a small round mirror, recalls childbirth. Furthermore, the images work together in two parts like mother and child. In tandem, the images develop an interplay and a tension in the physical space which extends to the viewer. The purposefully contrasted images may evoke a sense of discomfort in the viewer that recalls childbirth and maternal rupture.



Figure 13: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 11 and 12*. 2019. Digital photographs. Archived.

Photography, like motherhood, contains powerful dichotomies that may traverse and transgress institutionalised representations of the maternal experience and reveal alternative realities. “Excess and loss, abundance and void: photography and motherhood are intertwined in more ways than one might initially expect” (Bright 2013, 10). It is these complex dichotomies in the production of my images that are intricate, uncertain and risky allowing for the medium’s potential to transform visions of motherhood and mother/daughter relationships.

Chapter Seven: Love and interrogation

Photography offers me a unique ethnographic tool to 'embody' my feminine experience. Via the lens of the camera, I perceive and express my experiences and facilitate intimacy between photographer, subject and viewer. "It is not about representing clearly the knowable or certain, but more about recording the imaginative perception of the embodied experience" (Allmark 2009, 267). With my mother as subject, I employ the camera as a vehicle for both love and interrogation. With love I photograph nuanced moments the mother/daughter bond and celebrate the potential for enduring maternal return. With interrogation, I strategically construct my images and expose ambiguous relationship dynamics which subvert traditional and institutionalised versions of mother/daughter bonds. In this chapter, I navigate the power, potency and potential risk of the photographic process in capturing moments of the intimate and filial and discuss my creative work in more detail, elaborating on symbolism within the photography and exploring emblems of motherhood that give the work rich and multilayered meaning.

In the home, it is usually a parent who takes on the role of family photographer. As the child photographing my mother, I am deviating from the traditional role of family photographer and, in doing so, I reconfigure the power relations of portrait photography. I subvert traditional family photographic practice by photographing the parent in intimate and private moments exploring the "...extreme differences in power, authority, and influence that separate parents from children" (Hirsch 1997, 164). Fissures of power inherent to the photographic medium stem from the camera's association to masculinity and 'phallus'. The camera as 'phallus', is assumed as an authoritative onlooker designed to "point" and "shoot", is "...a flimsy variant of the inescapable metaphor that everyone unselfconsciously employs" (Sontag quoted in *Living with his Camera* 2003, 7). The camera in this way creates an omniscient viewpoint, a subjective construction from the perspective of the photographer. Bright notices, "many photographers feel uncomfortable with the imbalance of control that a camera offers and so question and play with the power exchanges at work" (Bright 2005 20). Within this power imbalance, photography may be eschewed for its exploitative nature via the extension of the camera and applied with limitations concerning cultural prescriptions and traditions. I wrestle with perceptions of power imbalance and risk in photography and thus aim to work tentatively and intimately with my subjects.

To take a portrait is to “participate in another person’s morality, vulnerability and mutability” (Sontag 2008, 15). I embrace the potency the portrait offers working collaboratively with my mother as she volunteers herself to the scrutiny of the camera. “Inherent to the photographic, as to desire and love, is the paradox and impossibility of grasping a body, the quest to close this gap between oneself and the other, the image, and the inevitable distance which always remains” (Teichmann 2011, 9). With both interrogation and love, I turn my lens to investigate my personal subjectivities about our relationship but also to expose my mother’s own morality and vulnerability. As such, the camera “...makes loving pictures and picturing love a vertiginous extended moment of absolute proximity and distance at once” (Teichmann 2011, 9). Strategically composed images capture private moments of my mother in personal environments, suggesting an intimacy and vulnerability that reveals personal truths and in turn speaks about my relationship with her.

In *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 15* my mother faces away, her body turned from the camera. The view into the subject’s personal space reveals intricacies that facilitates voyeuristic participation in my mother’s and my own “...morality, vulnerability and mutability” (Sontag 2008, 15). The simultaneously loving and interrogative gaze contained within the frame, allows my photographs to “...convey aspects of human presence that unsettles the conventional aesthetic viewing positions” (Allmark 2009, 272). This approach helps create photographic images which deviate from comfortable readings and instead, provide a space for complex reflections about parent/child relationships.



Figure 14: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 15*. 2019. Digital photograph. Archived.

Photography, and the portrait genre specifically, contains a paradox that “...can never offer certainty” (Wilkinson 2010, 11). The paradox is the seemingly

unmediated nature of the photograph as an independent reflection of reality while at the same time being a construction” (Wilkinson 2010, 111). It is the opposing forces of the ‘real’ and ‘constructed’ that imbue the photographic portrait with fluidity and ambiguity about identity and the self. A portrait is often thought to be an objective collaboration between subject and photographer, “...that the image is a record of how a cooperative subject really appeared, and wanted to appear in front of the camera” (Schwalbe 2009, 179). This claim suggests the portraits primary function is to embellish the subjects ‘real’ or ‘true’ character and essence, to make “...an avowal of a sitters self...a reliable basis for inferring what lies beneath appearances” (Schwalbe 2009, 179). This project reveals ambiguities of the mother/daughter relationship. I embrace the portraits potential for uncertainty, constructing collaborative tableaux of my mother in uncannily everyday scenarios. In *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 1* my mother is in her lounge room, elegantly holding a cigarette and gazing out the window. The interior setting is tidy, artistically designed and evokes a 70s suburban aesthetic. A dog tentatively watches as the cat cleans itself and a photograph of a woman gazes beyond the frame. The mise-en-scene is carefully composed to create a triangular intersection that draws the viewer. As daughter and photographer, I am both a part of the scene and separated from it. The ambiguity imbued in the photograph undermines the sense of photographic realism and develops fluidity in the work, especially because, in staged photography “subjects become complicit in the act of being photographed. We’re not seeing them as they are, but rather as they were being photographed” (Carroll 2015,43).



Figure 15: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 1*. 2019. Digital photograph. Archived.

Photography is therefore a powerful tool which may both intimately and lovingly depict visions of the mother subject and mother/daughter bond, yet also critique and comment on it. I take advantage of this photographic potential and carefully and

strategically construct my photographs taking into account potent and symbolic elements of the mise-en-scene including lighting, objects, colour, pattern and fabric. In *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 8*, I photograph elements of interior spaces such as the kitchen sink. These elements are emblems of motherhood that I integrate to bring the private to the public realm. I am interested in photographing these objects and spaces to create tension and rupture in the work that intimates the feelings of love and loss inherent to the mother/daughter bond. "A detail of a scene can tell as much as and sometimes more than an overall shot" (London, Stone and Upton 2008, 320). I close in on objects and furnishings and introduce tension and polarity in my photographs. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 8* captures a cluttered kitchen sink, in which steam billows from a pot. The image recalls the Kitchen Sink art movement of the 1950's by observing everyday settings and objects as fuel for art. The quiet everyday moments emphasise the absurd and ambiguous. I traverse boundaries of staged and candid photography of distilled moments within the frame that unsettle and create an unnerving disquiet.



Figure 16: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 8*. 2019. Digital photograph. Archived.

My work fosters connotations between women and nature. Plants, trees, roots, branches and earth denote fertility and procreation. Houseplants, trees, decorative botanical elements on fabric and even the Australian bush are referenced throughout the series and infused with symbolism about motherhood. In particular, trees can be linked to motherhood as they are strong, fruit bearing organisms and hence are a kind of mother because of their nurturing energies. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 26* captures my mother leaning against a wall, next to her a decorative painting of a tree. She is portrayed as strong and self-reliant representing enduring maternal strength and stability.

Natural light sources create uncertain atmospheres of ambiguity and tension. Careful compositions draw on influences of portrait painting where light enhances subjects pose, gesture and facial expression. Colour and texture arrive in the way light falls to emphasise surfaces, fabrics and forms with soft and shadowy tonal and painterly qualities. The painterly quality of my work, through the dispersal of light and dark, references classical and romantic painting techniques. “Contrasts between light and dark draws a viewer’s eye” (London, Stone and Upton 2008, 334). In painting, this is called Chiaroscuro. I position my subjects making most of the natural light to illuminate the subject in a soft, desaturated colour setting. I work with the space seeking moments of drama or darkness to inform my compositions. For example, in *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 10*, my mother poses in a chair in her kitchen, the golden beams of light hitting her face and body with a silhouette of the windows flyscreen. The image contrasts dramatic light with subdued, shadowy areas creating a painterly tonal quality. The natural lighting creates a tension with the subject as a focal point in relation to the background. This dramatic viewpoint creates a striking visual focus reminiscent of Tenebrous and Chiaroscuro techniques. These effects further establish intimacy between photographer, subject and viewer.



Figure 17: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 10*. 2018. Digital photograph. Archived.

There are reflections and intersections of colour, pattern and motif that develop an interplay between the images. The colours red and yellow feature consistently throughout the series and denote associations of love, fire, passion, flesh and blood. Red in particular jumps out at the viewer – it is a powerful colour which imbues the image with meaning. The colour red is associated with love and sacrifice; elements that resonate with the maternal experience. The colour red is used to cover my

book contrasted with the title embossed in gold. These features give the book a regal feel and reference the carnal elements of motherhood that are explored throughout the series.

Fabric and texture are consistent visual elements that feature in the series. For example, lace fabric makes associations to rites of passage such as communion and marriage. It also denotes purity, innocence and new beginnings. I am particularly drawn to the fabric for its intricate weave and pattern which, symbolises both the fragility and strength of the mother/daughter relationship. It is fragile because it is delicate and intricate, yet strong and unyielding like a spider's web.

"You can reveal a lot about your subject by photographing the traces they leave behind" (Carroll 2015, 36). In *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 3 and 7*, I photograph my mother's dresses, unworn and lain upon a bed. The dresses are from the 1940s and 50s signalling traditional concepts of motherhood and the housewife. However, I intend to celebrate these items of clothing for their subversive and symbolic power. For me, the dresses signal to deep maternal memories of comfort which came from the bosom and the touch of cloth. Yet, the dresses are also indicative of my mother's identity, femininity and individuality.



Figure 18: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 3 and 7*. 2019. Digital photographs. Archived.

At work is a recognition and avowal to the plurality of the photographic and its potential to present multilayered meanings - a "...site which numerous gazes intersect...an infinitely multiple and contradictory series of looks; and the external institutional and ideological gazes about which the act of taking pictures defines itself" (Hirsch quoted in *Uncertain Surrenders*. 2010, 122). My approach navigates these fluid and intertwining boundaries and embraces nuances of ambiguity. To

apply Bright's words; "this fine balance between the intuitive and staged make for taut vignettes which are an important addition to a history of images of those, and by those, who are both blessed and bound" (Bright 2009, 5).

Chapter Eight: In the name of the mother

Au nom de la mère translates as 'In the name of the Mother' and refers to my mother's French heritage and surname, *du Bignon*. *Au nom de la mère* is a project that, as daughter, facilitates an enduring connection with the mother. It is open ended supporting further research and includes the changing of my surname from the paternal to the maternal. To support this continuum I explore the significance of naming structures and identity with reference to Mavis Himes in '*The Power of Names: Uncovering the Mystery of What We Are Called*' (2016). I elaborate on my feminist writing of the body - '*L'écriture féminine*', as well as explore the poetic and ambiguous qualities of the French language to highlight subversion. Furthermore, drawing from Carolyn Eichner in '*In the name of the mother: Feminist opposition to the Patronym in Nineteenth century France*' (2014), I explore how taking on the maternal name will allow for a *jouissance* between mother and daughter.

As a feminist practitioner, I resist embedded patriarchal paradigms that are sustained through language and naming practices. French feminists argue language is based on a masculine economy; "...the phallogocentric nature of language in its simplistic binaries alienates women from their corporeality and their sexuality" (Allmark 2003, 104). As Eichner asserts, "patrilineality presupposes the absolute primacy of the male lineage, denying any value to the mother's ancestry by deeming it unworthy of ongoing symbolic representation" (Eichner 2014, 660). I reject the paternal conventions and argue for the maternal name that empowers and celebrates maternal lineage. *Untitled (Au nom de la mere) 14* is a photograph of my mother's birth certificate sealed in a plastic sleeve is lain upon crisp white floral fabric. The document reveals my mother's birth name *du Bignon*. By including this image, I celebrate my mother's ancestry and maternal name and position my work in the name of the mother.



Figure 19: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 14*. 2020. Digital photograph. Archived.

As a young woman growing up in a patriarchal society, I feel disconnected from my maternal histories and French heritage through the du Bignon name. This project affords a powerful and deeply felt reconnection with the mother, supporting the change of my last name from paternal to maternal. The echoes of my French lineage are enlivened and further enhanced through my investigation of French theory and thought that promotes feminine subjectivity and autonomy. “Patrilineality undermined women: first, in circumscribing their autonomy; second, in constructing their identities; and third, in denying them their histories” (Eichner 2014, 179). The changing of my name from paternal to maternal rejects patriarchal structures and informs ongoing research into the maternal relationship and my French heritage.

The title, *Au nom de la mere*, works poetically and conceptually. I borrow from the French feminist method ‘*L’écriture féminine*’ as developed by Hélène Cixous. “...*Écriture féminine* is the desire for women to speak with meanings that are corporeal and tactile as well as conceptual” (Allmark 2003, 30). The vehicle of photography via language provides an alternative version of the mother/daughter narrative. The French language is a homage to my heritage and is subversive because “... poetic language is the recovery of the maternal body within the terms of language, one that has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law” (Butler 1989, 105). The title *Au nom de la mère*, is ambiguous. When translated into English, it references religious prayers such as “*In the name of the father, (son and holy spirit)*”. *In the name of the mother* subverts Western language traditions to claim a renewed feminist perspective. The ambiguity of the French language allows for challenging and multifaceted readings of my work and encourages enduring maternal return and *Jouissance*.

Jouissance is "...a matter of embracing the repressed other". The maternal name and enduring bond between mother and daughter is "...a blissful merging of self and other, rather simply than glorifying oneself in a (masculine) position of mastery and authority" (Allmark 2003, 38). To return to the mother, I return to her French heritage and maiden name *du Bignon* which, "...opens up new possibilities of subjective agency within language... the creative remaking of identity through the use of a symbolic name change" (Castelloe 2017, 339). I am symbolically re-joining with the mother through language and photography. Mavis Himes states, "Just like the physical cut from the umbilicus that separates us from our mother, so our given name creates a first psychological scansion, or division, from our biological parents and heralds us into the world with a particular mark of identity" (Himes 2016, 3). In *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 24 and 25* I photograph the home I grew up in and the street sign of that home. Like the mother, the home is a place of melancholic warmth, shelter and stability. The English meaning of the name *du Bignon* is 'hill', therefore photographing the street sign further facilitates re-joining with the mother and *du Bignon* name.



Figure 20: Olive Lipscombe. *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 24 and 25*. 2019. Digital photograph. Archived.

"Visual art may offer new means of enquiry and new empowering strategies to art education" (Gaudelius 1993, 27). Feminist questions of power and agency inform my auto-ethnography and creative investigation to re/present motherhood and the maternal experience. Cixous' *L'écriture féminine* and Kristeva's *Jouissance* guide my rejection of patriarchal structures which have shaped my identity and experience as a woman. Marie Maclean argues, "a name is both the encapsulation of a past and the potential for the future" (Marie Maclean quoted in Eichner 2014, 660).

As I look to the future of this project. I also ponder the possibility of my own maternity. I am unsure of the prospects of bringing a child into the world today. In some way *Untitled (Au nom de la mère) 6* captures this anxiety. In the photograph, my mother has her back to me, the bush setting and golden hues that flicker off my mother's jacket express and allude to my concerns about motherhood in our current climate, particularly in Australia - a country that is currently on fire.

Au nom de la mère is a work in progress that will continue to evolve throughout my extended photographic practice. In 2020 I aim to attend *Les Rencontres de la photographie Arles* festival in France. The photography festival includes networking events, workshops and exhibitions and displays a high array of photographic work from all over the world. During my visit to France I also plan to visit the region of France the *du Bignon* lineage is from – Le Bignon. Here I may dig up further discoveries about my maternal histories and heritage and form deeper bonds to my maternal roots.

Conclusion

As a young woman photographer developing an awareness and empowerment of the female gaze, I consciously embody a feminist sensitivity and work within an auto-ethnography. The 'personal is political' – a mantra of the feminist movement – enforces and validates my personal experiences as significant. Clare Raymond describes, 'experience' as profound to inform and influence choices and the creation of 'true' art. Experience "...not only spurs the creation of art but is the goal of the true artist" (Raymond 2017, 144). Thus, an imperative method of art making places importance on the "...validity of personal experience as well as self-reflexivity, to attempt to convey the differing views of the world" (Spencer 2011, 12). My intimate and personal photographic approach makes poignant the embodied experience, "because all are born of women... motherhood remains a central and pervasive aspect of lived experience that requires rigorous examination" (Allred Hurtado 2011, 5).

In order for this project to influence visions of motherhood and mother/daughter relationships within cultural discourse, it needs to be shared with audiences in cultural institutions and presented in media publications such as artist books. I have presented the work in the form of a photobook. "The physical book still possesses a very special quality in the way that images are read and received; it is an intimate format designed for one person to look at" (Caruana and Fox 2012, 136). The book allows for an intimate engagement with the work and enables the possibility for distribution of the project to national and international galleries and audiences. In 2019 an image from this body of work was selected for Perth Centre for Photography's Iris Awards. The Iris Awards is an internationally recognised award which showcases excellence in photographic portraiture. A solo exhibition at Perth Centre for Photography will exhibit selected works from *Au nom de la mère* and opens on the 24th of January 2020. These modes of presentation may assist in creating greater recognition of my photographic practice and may offer space for reconsideration of the mother subject and mother/daughter relationship to new audiences.

Throughout this project, I have discovered the significance of my personal lived experience as a dynamic component of my photographic practice. "Feminist writing that is sourced in the female body offers a chance to (re)claim experience" (Allmark 2003, 41). I engage in an '*L'écriture féminine*' using photographic language to

reconnect me with the mother and celebrate the significance of the mother/daughter bond. I have become aware of the importance of my feminist lens as photographer – questioning and agitating accepted dominant structures of power and recognising the potency of the photographic portrait to offer fluid, multifaceted and intuitive perspectives. Like the maternal experience, my photographs are unstable and uncertain offering multilayered meanings that work to produce recognition of female autonomy and subjectivity. In reflection, these discoveries have helped to shape a body of work that is fluid and potent showing unguarded visions of motherhood and mother/daughter relationships. These transformations extinguish patriarchal repression that displaces motherhood from personhood, professionalism and self-knowledge (Liss 2009). Moreover, the images I have produced allow for visually ambiguous and open versions of maternity and the mother-daughter relationship.

According to Freud, “A girl senses she is being pulled in two directions... falling back to the mother or avoiding her fearfully” (Sigmund Freud quoted in Morgan 2010, 268). *Au nom de la mère* celebrates the strength and ambivalence of the tiermaternal relationship and encourages enduring return to the mother. The project is ongoing, it “does not begin but is prior to its beginning” (Blanchot 2001, 56) and is continually evolving. My experience of the maternal via my relationship with my mother has shaped my sense of self as a woman, daughter and photographer. The portraits of my mother capture the powerful dichotomies of love, loss, trauma and passion that I have come to realise are inherent in my psyche and are present in my ongoing relationship with her. It is the power of these dichotomies that embellish the portraits and present the maternal subject as vulnerable and invincible. “The return to the origin, then, is the impetus of the work[s], and the origin is also the work” (Raymond 2017, 161).

The photographic portrait negotiates an intricate three-way relationship between photographer, subject and viewer. Meanings lie in the personal subjectivities and histories of these three contributors, which, contained within the frame, present as complex narratives and discourses shaped by cultural, political and social contexts. I celebrate that my images embrace uncertainty and offer complex readings, but I also declare, that my images reveal my mother as an exquisite vulnerable subject.

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