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9. Maternal Ecologies

A Story in Three Parts

NATALIE S. LOVELESS

...[A]n idea always exists as engaged in a matter, that is as “mattering”.... As a result a problem is always a practical problem, never a universal problem mattering for everybody. Problems of the ecology of practices are also practical problems in this strong sense, that is problems for practitioners.

—Isabelle Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices”



IN MAY 2010, I gave birth to a four-pound, nine-ounce baby boy, two months prematurely. In response to the deep ways that the visceral materiality of my everyday was rearranged by this event, I began a series of daily practices organized at the intersection of feminist politics and performance art. These emerged from my need to find new ways, after the birth of my son, of thinking across practice-theory lines, as an artist-mother-theorist working

in the academy, both unwilling and unable to separate my status as mother from my status as artist or academic. These daily practices took the form of a three-year art research project performed with my son, from his third month to his third birthday. Taking feminist philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers' conception of "an ecology of practices" ("Introductory Notes" 193) to heart, in what follows I reflect on my life as a mother, my life as an academic, my life as an artist, and how I have worked to weave and knot the three together in responsive ways that interrogate each *through* the other.

OVERVIEW

On August 1, 2010, when my first and only child turned three months old, I began what I thought would be a three-month, daily-practice, art project. Three months turned into three years. Like many feminist artist-mothers before me, I began this project in the wake of my experience of new motherhood. The (in my case) quick and radical shift from gestation to parenthood prompted me to ask myself new questions about who and *how* I now was. Suddenly my academic-artistic life—a life characterized by a swath of intellectual and creative practices like going to art openings, writing papers, participating in art festivals, and attending academic conferences—was gone. There was little time to read or write or make, and my participation in public events dwindled.

Attempting to maintain some form of professional life, I found myself on the receiving end of what I can only characterize as a poverty of options. This poverty emerges from a set of inherited practices surrounding what it means to be an academic and/or artist in the small corner of the world that I inhabit. Despite the advantages of decades of feminist intervention in the professional sphere, I was asked, more than once, to leave the baby at home as a precondition of academic and/or artistic participation (the number of artist residencies that allow children are few, and lecturing with babe-in-hand is generally discouraged). This, more often than not, meant that I had to opt out. Instead of my forced absence being seen as a structural problem, it was characterized as a result of my choice to procreate. As a result, during these first years of parent-

hood, my ability to continue participating in artistic and academic events was dependent on my leaving the child at home—a choice that, for financial and other reasons, was not often a possibility. I tried to be creative, but even simple solutions, such as my partner and I taking turns at conferences between attending panels and wandering about with the baby, were often met with stern glances. I remember one particular symposium during which, on seeing me in the foyer with my son, a young faculty member at a U.S. "R1" university commented that she would never bring her child to work with her, even to visit, as she had been told in no uncertain terms that it would tarnish her professional status in the eyes of her colleagues. Inspired by stories like these, I developed a three-year daily practice project called *Maternal Ecologies*.

Part one, "Action A Day (Maternal Prescriptions)," was a trimester-long web-based project that used the language of performance art to recast the maternal everyday. This first year of my son's life was also the last year of my life as a doctoral student. In part two, "Action A Day (Documenting Firsts)," I documented and researched a "first" for 210 days (my best approximation of the number of days that my two-months-premature son was *in utero*), beginning on my son's first birthday. During this second year, I worked part time, as a visiting assistant professor in a different city and country than that in which I had done my dissertation. And, in part three, "An Action A Day (Gone/There)," I worked with my son to document my daily departures and returns: as I left for and returned from my first tenure-track job at a university in yet another province and city. This final part was performed in the third year for one trimester. This three-year, three-part project emerged as a response to (1) a perceived poverty of cultural imaginaries surrounding active parenting options for academics and artists uninterested in, or unable to take a career hiatus during the first years of motherhood; (2) an historical insistence on the invisibility of the professional artistic and/or academic mother (see, for instance, Bee and Schor); and (3) the sense of general isolation that I experienced as a working artist-academic with new maternal status.

I suspect that my generation of artist and/or academic mothers—many of whom are the sons and daughters of feminism's second wave (with "mothering" here understood as a social and

affective position that people of any gender can occupy)—have had a tough go of it, as the promises and insights of both second and third wave feminism fail to translate into a livable integration of career and home-life. And, while isolation may well be a common characteristic of all early motherhoods within a nuclear family culture, the professional needs of academic life and certain forms of artistic practice (for example, performance art) compound this isolation through their compulsory geographic mobility. It is the lucky academic who can find a job in a city where they already have a care network of family and friends; it is the lucky artist who does not need to travel to perform or install work and attend openings. In response to these conditions, the performance practices that I developed for *Maternal Ecologies* relied heavily on social and mobile media to stage an intervention into the daily practice of my (maternal) everyday life—a site of gentle resistance and possibility—that would span the first three years of my son’s life and mark my transition from doctoral student to tenure-track professor.

A multi-year conceptual art project like *Maternal Ecologies*, operating at the intersection of feminism and contemporary art, cannot help but recall, for those familiar with twentieth-century art history and practice, Mary Kelly’s infamous *Post-Partum Document* (produced between 1973 and 1979). The connection is an important one. I first encountered Mary Kelly as author of the essay “Reviewing Modernist Criticism” during the summer of 1997, when I was just out of college. After this first encounter, I went on to discover Kelly not only as a provocative theorist but also as an artist. Motherhood being far from my mind at that point, it was Kelly’s engagement with Lacan that drew me in. Her provocative use of the psychoanalytic theorist led me to pick up his famous “Mirror Stage” essay and devour it in one sitting. Reflecting from my present position, it does not seem a reach to suggest that Mary Kelly phantasmatically birthed me as a hybrid artist-academic that summer, and in ways that I could not have predicted. Little did I know at that point that the vector between artist and academic would critically expand to include mother.

While I was implicitly informed by Kelly’s (*Post-Partum Document*, *Imagining Desire*) psychoanalytic investigation of the

warp and weft of maternal experience, explicitly I conceived of *Maternal Ecologies* as a digital reinvestigation of the propositional practices of FLUXUS instruction and action works. An amorphous mid-twentieth-century collective art movement, FLUXUS worked to recast the everyday, bringing conceptualism’s focus on “art as idea” together with a turn to “art and life,” indebted, amongst other things, to feminist theory and activism (Hendricks). It is a genre that has received renewed attention over the past few years in the context of a contemporary turn to “social practice” in the arts (Jackson; Bishop). Importantly, given my current research focus, this turn to social practice (also sometimes called a “pedagogical turn,” [see Rogoff; Bishop]) influences developing understandings of what we in Canada call “research-creation” (Chapman and Sawchuk). A developing genre with emergent methodologies, research-creation grounds *Maternal Ecologies*—a project that asks: what forms of daily practice can I develop that do justice to the ecologies of working concurrently as a mother, an academic, and an artist?

Cultural theorist and philosopher Donna Haraway’s recent work suggests Navajo string figures as ways “of giving and receiving patterns ... of relaying connections that matter, of telling stories in hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, to craft conditions for flourishing.... String figure games are practices of scholarship, relaying, thinking with, becoming with in material-semiotic makings” (“SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation” 13). I take Haraway’s proposition to be that string figures are material-semiotic story-telling practices, in which the crafting of a story is understood as the crafting of an ethics. With Haraway’s figuration as a guiding one, my aim with *Maternal Ecologies* is to tell a string-figure story of my maternal everyday in ways that might open up a *theorypractice* grounded in imaginative and deeply material connections between maternal and professional labours; a “string figure” story that invites us to live life just a little bit differently (King; Haraway, *Companion Species*).

PART 1: ACTION A DAY (MATERNAL PRESCRIPTIONS)

For the first part of *Maternal Ecologies*, “Action A Day (Maternal

Prescriptions),” I invited five mothers from three countries (the US, the UK, and Canada) and four cities (Boston, New York City, Cardiff, and Montreal), also academics and/or artists with children under two, to “perform” with me every day for three months.¹ To begin the project I sent them this brief description:

This project is about the ecologies of care that texture everyday (maternal) life.

Project: I send you a performance action from my experience of daily life (e.g., “listen to baby’s breath,” “watch baby sucking on finger,” “observe the rise and fall of breath,” or whatever action I want to bring the attention of “performance” to that day). You do the same for me. I perform as many actions as are sent to me, and if none are sent, I only perform my child’s action. Each day’s action(s) will be documented both in video and still-form with my smartphone and uploaded to a blog we will share for the duration of the performance.

Duration: Twelve weeks, August 1 to October 23, 2010

The process was as follows: I would choose one moment every day and, using the frame of performance, both restructure and reflect on my daily maternal labours and affects. I used the FLUXUS-inspired format of the instruction piece to recast the moment as both a “performance” and as a “prescription” that might offer a new lens through which to look at the incessantly demanding materiality of the everyday in the context of my first six months of motherhood. For eighty-four days in a row, I then sent that “prescription” to my collaborators to witness (and to perform for themselves). My collaborators were then invited to send me scores from their daily lives.

For example, on one particularly difficult day, I noticed that my son stopped crying every time I flushed the toilet. I crafted an instruction from this experience (“*developing coping mechanisms: discover how flushing the toilet can stop a scream*”) and sent it to my collaborators to perform with their children, if they wished. The action reframed a moment of early maternal life (negotiating a

WK16:06
September 3, 2010



developing coping mechanisms: discover how flushing the toilet can stop a scream.

crying infant) and presented it as a moment of shared research, as each mother was invited to perform an action that was specific to my and my son’s experience with their differently-aged and situated children. This exchange worked to recontextualize the individualism of contemporary (maternal) experience and encouraged us to reflect on the particularity of each of our developmental relations with our children—the ways that our *children* were developing, as well as the ways that *we* were developing relationally with them and with each other.

While I posted a “maternal prescription” every day and performed all instruction-scores sent to me, my collaborators were free to pick

and choose when and how they would participate. This meant that on some days, my son and I performed alone together, while on others we had three or four actions to perform. This performance practice inserted into the very fabric of my everyday a commitment to, and relation with, an international community of feminist mothers facilitated by internet technology. The instructions that framed the performance actions were at once coping mechanisms and invitations to share experience and affect.

WK 12: 04 August 4, 2010 12




Action from Alba and Maria
suck the little fingers she puts in your mouth while she sucks your nipple to feed. stare back at her as she looks at you.

[i tried to suck on his fingers, but it distracted him from feeding (still a difficult process for us). instead i kissed his hand while he fed, noticing his intent look of concentration. i tried to call out to him, but once latched he refused to look up.]

Action
(a little misty-eyed) watch him feed.

from maria: i did the action, watching alba feed. it's funny because i realized that by thinking of it as 'your' action, things have changed. these days i just read a book, i don't watch her anymore. i used to be so moved by the closeness, performing your action brought me back there: to pose and see her.



Action from Maeve and Dillon
imagine her at 20, 40, 60, and 80.

[looking at his minute facial gestures – the corner of the mouth, the nose, the eye – i imagined him as a young man, a man older than me, a man my father's age, an old man. seems impossible that he will ever not fit into my arms.]

PART 2: ACTION A DAY (DOCUMENTING FIRSTS)

In my second year of mothering, I found myself entangled in a narrative of “firsts”—my son’s first steps, first words, first view of the NYC skyline, first time saying “uh-oh” and pointing to something he’d dropped. My seduction with such firsts battled with my super-egoic criticism of that seduction. On one of the big “firsts”—his first birthday—I began the second chapter of *Maternal Ecologies*, “Action A Day (Documenting Firsts).” “Documenting Firsts” involved identifying a “first” every day for 210 days, taking a still photograph of that “first,” and then reflecting

Day 102 August 18, 2011



One-Shoe-Walking

O. decides that the thing to do is wander around the apartment wearing only one shoe – about this he is insistent. It is a balance test, and I watch him push himself to develop more and more subtle and agile forms of stability.

I take off one shoe and walk around with him.

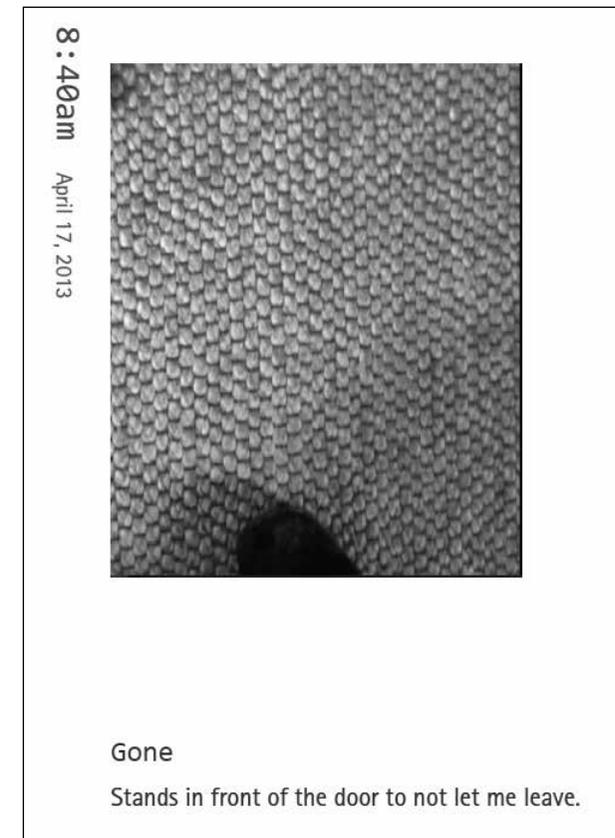
on the world of reference or meaning or affect that this “first” was drawing me into.

While I was critical of that narrative of human temporality marked by the language of “firsts,” I also found myself so very aware of the fragile and delicious *newness* of so many moments of our daily life together—as this tiny mammal discovered the worlds surrounding him—that I felt compelled to respond. His first cold: bacteria colonizing his gut. His first word: a step towards independence from my uncanny ability to translate his every micro-gesture. That year was a dazzling and exhausting dance with the “new,” both for him and for me. Paying attention to his (our) firsts was a way of seeing “firsts” everywhere and in everything, for example: my first taste of *this* cup of coffee; my first feeling of *this* breeze as it crosses my cheek. With a nod to Heraclitus (“No man ever *steps* in the *same river twice*, for it’s not the *same river* and he’s not the same man” [Plato: 402A]), a central side effect of this 210-day project was to pull me into a differently attuned temporality. Despite the progressive and anxiety-laden developmental drive of the language of “firsts” in Western parenting culture, instead of grounding me in the attainable future, the project of finding firsts in everything re-attuned me to the complex texture of a shifting present. The project’s parameters encouraged an aesthetic relation to the performance of everyday maternal life that became a knowledge-making project as much about me as about Orion.

Throughout the first two parts of *Maternal Ecologies*, I found myself confronted with a rich legacy of feminist concern with challenging any naturalization of feminine maternal sentiment. Rather than naturalizing sentimentality, from my current vantage point, I see the project as an exercise in both questioning *and* cherishing the bio-affective (Brennan) entanglement of maternal care work. Its ambivalent, glorious complexities colour my writing life, my teaching life, and even my practices of being a colleague. Banal as this may sound, as the mother of a still-young child, trying to work responsively between the academic, artistic, and the maternal, my capacity to dwell in any one thing has been completely recalibrated into a multi-modal dance that takes surrender, creativity, and patience. This recalibration is one that has shifted from year to year, and, accordingly, each segment of the three-year project reflects something specific about the needs of that period. While “Maternal Prescriptions” concerned itself with the overwhelming

intensity of infancy, “Documenting Firsts” was grounded in the move from infant to toddler—the move out of the arms and into the world. As I write this, now, a good nine months after the end of “Documenting Firsts,” and twenty-eight months after the end of “Maternal Prescriptions,” these projects exist for me as entanglements of affect, politics, and labour; they also have become a particular form of *witness*. Looking back, I see how much I have already forgotten, the power of Orion’s current presence eclipsing so much of the creature he once was.

PART 3: ACTION A DAY (GONE/THERE)



On May 9, 2013, I completed the third and last part of *Maternal Ecologies*. For part three, “Action A Day (Gone/There),”

my son and I documented my departures and arrivals over the last trimester of his second year; the project ended on the day that my son turned three. While preparing for this last part of the project, I noticed some differences that led to my declaring it the last iteration of this series. These all had to do with Orion's growing individuation. While we were still nursing, my experience of this practice had shifted. Nursing remained, during that third year, an artifact and comfort primarily tied to my return from work and nursing my son to sleep. Despite the fact that I was still producing milk and feeding him with it, the connection felt nothing like it had in year one, or even in year two. During this third year, nursing felt like something waiting to be over. My body had adjusted such that my breasts never engorged—whether I was gone for a day on campus without pumping, or away for a week at a conference. Whereas, once upon a time, nursing was characterized by urgent internal mammary pressure and the release/relief of Orion's suckle, towards the end of this third year I had to grab and squirt just to assure myself that there was, in fact, still milk, and that my son was not just sucking skin. In the weeks leading up to "Gone/There," I wrote the following in an email to a fellow mother:

My breasts are largely limp and his suck chafes as much as it warms. The act of nursing, once a bond of ridiculous intimacy and immediacy seems mundane. It is a practice that, for us, has outlived its need and that will, no doubt, disappear before long. I will miss the unique bio-psycho-social connection that nursing has been for us, but he is stepping into such serious individuality these days—sometimes reaching new heights on a daily basis. Only last month he started using the indexical "I" to refer to himself for the first time (rather than the previous third person: "Orion wants..."). He spends time on his own, refers to himself eloquently, and has a rich internal life that he communicates endearingly ("You want to pick me up because I love you mama"). He wants me, but, in many of the previous senses, doesn't *need* me: he can walk on his own, eat on his own, and communicate his

needs in ways that others understand. (Loveless, personal email, February 26, 2013).

It was this manifest shift from *need* to *want* that inaugurated the last part of the series, and with it came necessary changes to my formal/structural choices. Whereas the first two daily practice pieces were performed in the context of a body still variably tied like an appendage to mine—his movement and communication so very dependent on my proximity and physical intervention—in this third year we could no longer relate to each other in this way, try as I might in moments of nostalgia. Responsive to this new structure of relating, for the final daily-practice piece I handed *him* the technology with the invitation to document, in video, our departures and reunions. Generally this meant that the footage was taken at odd angles, with extreme close-ups. Over the course of three months I watched him develop a relationship with my smartphone, using it as a transitional object. I would offer him the device every day as I left and would say my goodbyes while he held it, pointing the camera lens in whatever direction he pleased. Similarly, every day when I returned, I took out the phone and handed it to him, asking him about his day as he videotaped our interaction. The audio track captured our negotiation and ritualizing of our departures and reunions, and also marked a movement across the three years, from looking and touching to speaking and hearing. Some days, I would hand him the phone without incident; others he would refuse, knowing what was to come. Towards the end of the project he would grab the phone from me when he saw that it was time, do the ritual almost without me, and then turn back to whatever he had been engaged in.

CONTEXT

It is worth reflecting just a little bit further on the technological context on which all three parts of this project have been dependent: social and mobile media as a framework particularly suited to not only documenting maternal "mess," but also restructuring it. While an idea of performance that comes from a visual arts history concerned with the art/life divide was a generative of the project

(Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*; Montano; Ukeles), this project did not live in the realm of personal daily-practice performance alone. It relied upon the capacities of social and mobile media (in this case a smartphone and a blog) to create visible community surrounding everyday actions that were then recast as performance. The internet was my community lifeline, hosting a network of complex and multi-valenced solidarities at each stage of the project.

The Internet in general, and social media in particular, is said to shorten the distance between people, and when one thinks of the psychogeographical cartographic imaginary facilitated by the inter-webs, this makes sense. For example: I was Skyping with my son while away at a conference not long after completing the last part of *Maternal Ecologies*, and, as I was doing so, my eyes caressed the texture of his face, my mouth kissed the screen, my arms circled it. My son kissed back, hugged back, and cried that he missed me. It was intimate. He cried; I soothed. He cried; my breasts, still not fully dry, leaked a little. Social media facilitates a very material encounter: the materiality of breast milk; the material impact of an infant's cry; the soothing clucks of a mother's voice.

Embodiments are multiple, they are complex, and they are always transversally constituted. My son has grown up knowing his family—my sister in Brooklyn, his grandmother in Colorado—through the medium of Skype (for his first two years, we Skyped with his grandmother every morning). Skype isn't a new invention for him; it is the way the world has always been. For him, sometimes you are “in the (com)puter” and sometimes out. When I am away and Skyping with my son, we perform a profoundly material enmeshment. Having me there on the computer seems to do something to his whole being. Acting like I am there with him, he runs around to show me things and I can see him relaxing. He communicates not my absence, but my *presence*.

MATTER::MATER::MOTHER

Each of the three installments of *Maternal Ecologies* structured, differently, my attention within an aesthetic, performative, and political frame. To use Isabelle Stengers' language, each “vector-

ized” my concrete experience (“Introductory Notes” 97). Taking the mundane seriously, *Maternal Ecologies* speaks to both ecologies of care (Puig de la Bellacasa), as well as to the complex, multi-valent, and affective textures associated with human infancy. Through the three years of the project, I worked to inhabit the thick, daily practice of mothering from a perspective resistant to idealized representation and open to affective entanglement and intensity. I performed from the presupposition of a complex material-semiotic ecology of practices at the heart of feminist mothering (Liss; Ettinger)—a conception of mothering as an affective, social, cultural, and material thinking-practice at odds with conceptions of motherhood that see it as a training relation organized around the social good. That common conception reduces motherhood to a social function—a training relation—that one can do more or less effectively in relation to agreed-upon norms. This training relation is suffused with affect, however that affect is read in the service of motherhood's normalizing social function: the mother must love unconditionally in order for the infant to thrive (Ruddick). For the mother to bask in that affect towards her own ends is often constructed as narcissistic and detrimental to the child. The mother cannot be “all about the mother,” she must be “all about the child” (Edelman). I wanted to challenge the dualism of this worldview by exploring the material-tropic pleasures of the maternal without closing down the multivalence of what these can mean, particularly to those of us navigating the complex intersections of professional (artistic; academic) and maternal practice.

In the context of both second and third wave feminist suspicion surrounding a materiality aligned with determinate “essence,” to return to and talk about the materiality (rather than representation) of motherhood is fraught territory (Fuss; Kelly, *Imagining Desire*). As someone entrenched in the “string figure” practices of motherhood, and both enamored and incensed by many of my daily experiences, it seems to me that the material-semiosis of the everyday is *precisely* what needs attending. I find myself asking: what relational enmeshments are the conditions of possibility for our practices, and how are those either valued or disavowed? How do maternal practices and affects remake our professional/social

practices, and vice versa? How can bringing attention to these, as embodied material-semiotic events, suggest alternate ways of engaging in daily practices that cross public/private, personal/political lines, not collapse them into the other but to ask them to *remake* each other? And: while these are not new questions, why might it be important to ask them *anew*?

In asking these questions, I am interested in how the figures we use to think with reconfigure our internal geographies/cartographies—our psycho-geo-materio-affective spaces. From a dualistic ideological perspective, in ways that poststructuralist and feminist philosophic thought has challenged, one side of a binary structure is always undervalued, though constitutive. As is familiar to many of us, unlike its partner “spirit,” “matter,” with its etymological link to “mater” or “mother,” is “mere,” and, along with it, the messy banality of maternal labour. *Maternal Ecologies* performs familial, affective, domestic intimacy in a public context, at the feminist intersection of a historical public/private divide that is always already gendered and imbued with value. Instead of allowing this to stand as an inherited division, however, it is crucial that we open it up to its own paradoxes and flux; that we attend to the materiality of daily practice, the materiality of affect, the materiality of time, all the while recognizing that not all materialities are consonant or equivalent. A densely local and material intra-action (Barad 33), the maternal constitutes us as not *in* but *of* the world.

The last three years have moved me profoundly. My performances of everyday (maternal) life have frustrated, reorganized, and entranced me. As I write these final lines, grabbing time between teaching prep and household management, my son looks at me and says, “I want to climb on you mama.” If the past three years of daily practice have taught me anything, it is to nurture the polymorphous qualities of maternal life—the insistence on a necessary and equally committed multiplicity of voice and being and care that is responsive and generous in the face of the often painfully interruptive and unpredictable aspects of early maternal life. If anything characterizes my maternal ecologies, it is this. While inhabiting the strictures of social convention—what gets to count as legitimate (writing) behaviour, where, when and how,

or, what is *too* personal, where, when, and *why*—I invoke the structure of chapter ten of *A Thousand Plateaus* to consider the daily performance iterations of *Maternal Ecologies* as both the crafting of “string figure” stories and as the weaving of *memories*. Memories of someone who can never tell when she is being an artist and when she is being a scholar and when she is being a mother, or when she is being too little or too much of each.



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¹My collaborators for the project were my son, Orion Loveless LaBare (three months-six months); Alex Metral and her son Huxley Alder Metral (five months-eight months); Shannon Coyle and her daughter Zetta Coyle Rašović (seven months-ten months); Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and her daughter Alba Puig de la Bellacasa (eight months-eleven months); Krista Lynes and her son Xavier Emmanuel Lynes Weiss (twelve months-fifteen months); and Dillon Paul and her daughter Maeve Paul (thirteen months-sixteen months). The full project may be viewed at www.maternalecologies.ca.

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