More Than Making Milk: Challenging Autonomous Subjectivity and Linear Time in Textile Art about Breastfeeding from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

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Instead of seeing infancy as the beginning of a life rooted in linear time, and from which the subject gradually establishes itself as separate from the mother, a concept of time that accounts for the ongoing interrelationships between subjects and the reliving of past rituals in the present sees motherhood as a state that is constantly in renewal and selves as interdependent upon each other. In this thesis, I argue that embroidery works by Katie Errington Davies and Kesso Saulnier, which are a material form particularly poised to evoke the physicality of bodies, have great potential to visually manifest these challenges to hegemonic notions of selfhood and time particularly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, whose stay-at-home orders had potential to highlight relationships and labours of care but ultimately reiterated Western concepts of individual isolation and linear time. Like breastfeeding and other labours of care that involve the repetition of an act like feeding or diaper changing, embroidery enacts and records such repetition in the form of a stitch, and is an art form that is particularly accessible to mothers and has a long history with the institution of motherhood. . . .

Acknowledgements

To paraphrase Shakespeare, the course of a graduate degree never did run smooth, and I am lucky to have had the most patient and understanding of supervisors in Dr. Elaine Cheasley Paterson, whose belief in and enthusiasm for this work and other projects of mine has been absolutely buoying as I have worked full time and raised children during this degree.

Thank you also to Dr. Rebecca Duclos, whom I chose as a reader because of my wonderful experiences in her *Speaking From the Studio* seminar in the winter of 2022. It was a rocky era personally and the course was a haven of creativity and care. I could not have asked for better academic support in this project than from you both.

The entire Art History department at Concordia warrants thanks for its excellent faculty and course offerings. I learned so much in every course and found in my professors great humanity and true intellectual rigor.

Children are often pitted as rivals of creative and career work, and while this is partially true, they also generate whole realms of experience and thought that have been integral to my area of study, to say nothing of the other ways in which they have enriched my life.

My parents, apart from their support throughout my life, agreed to host me and my two youngest children in their home for an indefinite period in 2020 and, in doing so, rescued my mental health and made that year among the best in my daughter Beata's memory. Their domestic labours allowed me reading and stitching time and long walks that I so desperately needed. My father warrants special mention for ceaselessly demonstrating men's capacity for care and unseen labour. Your reverence for the work you saw your mother do is evident in every task.

My older children bravely faced starting secondary school without my being present, as they chose to reside with their father while I was away. I will forever lament that period of separation but hope that they understand why I had to be in Newfoundland at that time.

Thanks also to my partner Zachary who showed love in the form of care packages from New York City when the border was closed and we could not meet. The museum gift shop offerings were particularly poignant, as were all the supplies I needed for the London Fogs I missed in city life.

Thanks to Raffi, especially for our beloved family song, “Baby Beluga,” which lulled my youngest to sleep every night for months on end, and which was a cornerstone of my own childhood. You were an early icon of child-honouring for me, and I continue to be inspired by your commitment to extending care to your audiences and to children across the world.

Finally, neither of my grandmothers finished high school but they were deeply intelligent and creative. They worked their whole lives, despite not holding remunerative employment. I hold them in my heart in all that I do and have deep gratitude for all they gave so that I can live a life of greater choice and freedom than they could have imagined.

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In 'motherhood,' there should (by definition) be more than one live creature involved. But in the usage of this name, she wasn't sure if she could hear it: interchange, exchange, the energy of a relation.

- *Kate Briggs,* The Long Form[1]

The main actions of feeding, sleeping/not sleeping, walking the baby. Scenes which in any case only confirmed by repeating all the same and already familiar gestures of newborn care. Like everyone else, she'd seen them acted out on TV and in other media: one or two short scenes standing in for repetition, for interruption, for responsibility.

- *Kate Briggs,* The Long Form[2]

Time is nonlinear within the orbit of the child.

- *Camille T. Dungy,* Guidebook to Relative Strangers: Journeys into Race, Motherhood, and History[3]

Introduction

In the eight-inch circular embroidery hoop, the predominant colour is a faded black denim, offset by a blue and white floral background. The denim shape is a mother's body from the neck down to the upper thighs; white chain stitching is all that defines the form of an infant against the mother's body but comprised of the continuous piece of denim. The child turns away from the viewer, nursing peacefully at the mother's left breast, its foot entangled with the mother's right hand. The mother's right nipple is exposed, a small circular piece of red fabric—a rose—is stitched to the denim with pink thread. The red is echoed in an oval form below the mother's navel: a recent caesarean section wound is made from a hole in the denim that had previously been mended by the English textile artist, Katie Errington Davies. Darker denim

[1] Kate Briggs, *The Long Form* (St. Louis, MO: The Dorothy Project, 2023), 176.

[2] Kate Briggs, *The Long Form* (St. Louis, MO: The Dorothy Project, 2023), 103.

[3] Camille T. Dungy, *Guidebook to Relative Strangers: Journeys into Race, Motherhood, and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017, 158-9.

patches the open wound from underneath, conveying the realism of a surgery scar forming. White mesh fabric outlines the mother's maternity underwear, with an opaque white pad visible. Just as the nipple's red visually echoes the surgery site, the white of the pad is the same as the white of the baby's diaper.[4] In this work, titled *Visibly Mending* (Fig. 1) both to reference the act of repairing a garment in a way that does not hide damage done in its wear and the post-operative healing of the mother, Davies depicts a mother and child dyad early in the postpartum period—what is often referred to as the fourth trimester of pregnancy—in a way that underscores their connectedness despite no longer sharing the same body, or at least, not sharing it in the same way as in pregnancy. The mother's body has three visible sites that challenge the body as a contained and autonomous being: the nipple, which provides milk; the surgery incision, through which the baby was delivered; and the pad covering the vulva, through which the body sheds vast quantities of blood regardless of the mode of delivery. The infant is quite literally of her flesh: they are made of the same fabric with only a fine line defining their forms against each other. That the mother's face is not visible is an explicit acknowledgement not only of the way that a woman may feel like a body reduced to her reproductive parts but also the way that the diversity of maternal subjectivities has been effaced in art: in Western art, breastfeeding has long been the near-exclusive domain of the *Madonna Lactans* (Fig. 2), an idealized portrait of virtuous motherhood, and an image in which the human mother is secondary to the divine

[4] While the gender of the infant is unclear, mothers of children assigned female at birth know that these infants bleed from their vaginas in a phenomenon known as "false menses" in the days after birth; this is caused by the drop of estrogen in the maternal body after the birth, and is a compelling reminder of the interconnectedness of mother's and child's bodies in the postpartum period, and furthers the relationship of the mother's pad and the infant's diaper in Davies' work. https://www.seattlechildrens.org/conditions/a-z/vaginal-bleeding/#:~:text=Newborn%20Vaginal%20Bleeding.&text=It%20can%20start%20any%20time,than%203%20or%204%20days. Accessed April 10, 2024.

infant,[5] Mary's body being, in Julia Kristeva's words, "an emptiness through which the patriarchal world is conveyed."[6] At the same time, the inaccessibility of facial features for either mother or infant can challenge the notion of erasure and speak to the shared aspect of this experience across cultures and individual experiences. Rather than—or better, in addition to—seeing the lack of the mother's face as a commentary on negative aspects like effacement of identity, one could see, as I do, the missing face as a place in which I may substitute my own but which is not limited to just me.[7] Davies' work thus conjures up a complexity of associations and histories in a medium and subject long dismissed from the category of fine art. As Andrea Liss has noted regarding the difficulties in the contemporary representation of feminist motherhood, "Still blatant is a patriarchal representation of motherhood that is caught between an ever-present 'natural' space, another based on an insipid invisibility where 'too specific' really means 'too personal,' and one in which a feminist woman herself labels and thus devalues the status of motherhood."[8] Davies' humble and small works depicting intimate acts of care and the impacts of these acts on the bodies engaged with them challenge these patriarchal notions and demand serious consideration for their making visible and tangible the complex and embodied interrelationships between mothers and children.

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[5] Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, xiiv-xiv. Liss addresses the domination of images of Mary as ideal mother and not specifically the *Lactans* images themselves, but given the prevalence of the *Lactans* paintings, it is a reasonable extension to make concerning images specifically depicting breastfeeding. Alison Bartlett speaks directly of the power of the *Madonna Lactans* imagery on multiple occasions in *Breastwork: Rethinking Breastfeeding*, Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 2005, 136.

[6] Quoted in Catherine McCormack, *Women in the Picture: What Culture Does with Female Bodies* (New York: Norton, 2021), 83-4.

[7] It is possible to read these faceless images as having the potential to be inclusive not only of various ethnicities but also of gender expression; it is more in the context of Davies' other works, in the medium of embroidery and her colour palettes, and through my own subjective experiences that I read maternity and femininity in these images that do not in fact preclude the possibility that they can depict transman experiences.

[8] Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, xv.

While maternal subjectivities had been depicted and theorized in art and literature prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the isolation of various stay-at-home orders early in 2020 made urgent the visibility of quotidian labours of care that were especially crucial when other modes of work supposedly 'shut down' or could be performed virtually. Breastfeeding, as a form of labour that is not only deeply embodied but involves the intimate interrelation of two or more bodies, and that is not merely unseen but encouraged to be hidden in many societies, became a site through which artists like Davies exposed numerous difficulties faced by nursing mothers and highlighted the need for better support of parents and caregivers not only in times of crisis as dramatic as the declaration of a pandemic, but consistently and for generations to come. [9] The rise of the highly communicable COVID-19 virus and the rhetoric about a 'return to normal' underscored human interconnectedness, unsettled our relationships with time, and caused many to question whether a return to normal was desirable. Now, some five years after the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the threat of disease has receded for many, COVID-19 itself has become something largely unseen, and those experiencing the effects of long COVID fight to be recognized by those who have relegated the disease to the past.[10]

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[9] While the term "invisible" has been popular in recent years to refer to things such as labour and disabilities that may not be visually evident, at a Speaker Training Session held for the Textile Society of America by Megan Canning and Rachel Crawford of the Constellation Collective, a consultancy firm certified by the International Association of Accessibility Professionals, they spoke of a preference for the term unseen which places the onus of witnessing on those who are not performing the labour or experiencing disability. This means that instead of invisibility being an inherent quality of its subject, it is instead an action performed by potential witnesses who may choose not to see the suffering of others. I attended the live session on September 20, 2024. The recording is no longer available, but the slides are available at https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/111ixaazCDOscXVknKXDUV4gtGv67yuFFoRnfpY2ZXG8/edit?usp=sharing Accessed November 10, 2024.

[10] On the March 15, 2025 episode of CBC Radio's national Science Program, *Quirks and Quarks*, host Bob McDonald talks to Dr. David Putrino, a researcher in the effects of organ damage that may affect more than the 1 in 5 Canadians who have experienced long COVID symptoms. See "Beyond long COVID — how reinfections could be causing silent long term organ damage," *Quirks and Quarks*, March 15, 2025. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/quirks/mar-15-the-silent-long-term-effects-of-covid-and-more-1.7483146. Accessed 18 March 2025.

In her groundbreaking 1976 work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, queer poet and essayist Adrienne Rich remarks that an educated young woman in the twentieth century "trying to create an autonomous self in a society which insists that she is destined primarily for reproduction, has with good reason felt that the choice was an inescapable either/or: motherhood or individuation, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom."[11] This struggle between binary choices that pit motherhood as at odds with a number of desirable qualities for the liberal humanist subject is ongoing, and a substantial part of the problem is that this subject is predicated on the notion of autonomy in which the image of a mother breastfeeding a child has the potential to intervene. As sociologists Monica Campo[12] and Robyn Lee[13] have more recently noted, the humanist model of autonomous selfhood is inadequate to account for the breastfeeding relationship: intersubjectivity is a more appropriate term. Further, Alison Bartlett argues for a consideration of breastfeeding as a "lived ontology" that allows it to be read as having "radical agency" that can disrupt Western understandings of time.[14] Instead of seeing infancy as the beginning of a life rooted in linear time, and from which the subject gradually establishes itself as separate from the mother, a concept of time that accounts for the ongoing interrelationships between subjects and the reliving of past rituals in the present sees motherhood as a state that is constantly in renewal and selves as interdependent upon each other.

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[11] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1976, 160.

[12] Monica Campo, "The Lactating Body and Conflicting Ideals of Sexuality, Motherhood, and Self," in Rhonda and Alison Bartlett, eds. *Giving Breastmilk: Body Ethics and Contemporary Breastfeeding Practice*. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2010, 52.

[13] Robyn Lee, *The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding: Power, Pleasure, Poetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 13

[14] Alison Bartlett, "Breastfeeding and Time," in Rhonda and Alison Bartlett, eds. *Giving Breastmilk: Body Ethics and Contemporary Breastfeeding Practice*. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2010, 226.

In this thesis, I argue that embroidery works, which are a material form particularly poised to evoke the physicality of bodies, and which require, like breastfeeding and other labours of care, the repetition of an act like feeding or diaper changing in the form of a stitch, have great potential to visually manifest these challenges to hegemonic notions of selfhood and time.

Choosing What Makes it into the Frame: Why Breastfeeding in this Medium?

Before pursuing my argument, I will first justify my research parameters and choice of terminology. There is such an abundance of art produced since 2020 that depicts breastfeeding that I had to limit my focus in part by genre, and feel that embroidery is the least written about, as well as an art form that may be performed while breastfeeding and which is, because of its historical association with femininity, the most resonant with the practice of breastfeeding itself. Art historian and psychotherapist Rozsika Parker explores the construction and changing of the relationship between embroidery and femininity in her pivotal 1984 text *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, and breastfeeding has, as academics like Robyn Lee have noted, been constructed in maternalist discourse as a "naturally" feminine act "and thus with passivity and bodily instinct instead of creative intelligence."[15] Both scholars expose these associations as constructs, but little has been written about this shared connection of embroidery, femininity, and breastfeeding.[16] Most of the art that has been written about concerning

[15] Robyn Lee, *The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding: Power, Pleasure, Poetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 20.

[16] Irene Bronner's essay "Stitching and Unpicking Ambivalence Toward Womanhood and Maternity in Works by Ilené Bothma" does, as its title suggests, engage with textile art like crochet, which features prominently in Bothma's works, as a metaphor for the repetitive and time-consuming labours of motherhood and the ambivalence caused by the pervasive notion that such work is naturally feminine. Some of Bothma's most provocative work, including her oil on canvas painting *Entangled Particles* (2018) (Fig. X), predates the pandemic, but resonate strongly with other works produced since 2020. I discuss Bothma's work further later in this paper. Nadiah Rivera Fellah also writes about textile works in the context of mothering, though not breastfeeding specifically, in "Beyond

subversion of norms involving breastfeeding focuses on the fields of photography and painting, and studies of textile art, while occasionally focusing on motherhood, sometimes leave it out entirely or do not address breastfeeding itself.[17]

While medical literature continues to promote the advantages of breastfeeding, I must assert my belief that bottle feeding, fraught as the issue is regarding the corporations that produce formula, is equally vital to a child's survival and a legitimate supplement or alternative should a parent be unable to or choose not to breastfeed. Bottle feeding, which has its own rituals of care and dutiful labour, and also has potential to promote greater gender equality in the infant feeding relationship, is worthy of its own studies in terms of qualitative experience and in its presence in art; Katie Errington Davies has works such as *A Catch in the Throat* (Fig. 4), which conveys the same bodily intimacy and warmth as her breastfeeding portraits, and whose use of previously mended denim for the mother's and child's bodies makes their interconnectedness similarly visible; its title, referencing the worn spot in the fabric of the mother's neck, speaks to some of the emotions that may accompany what is sometimes termed a failure to breastfeed, but also to the positive emotions that can cause a catch in the throat as one experiences the pleasure of seeing one's child eating and thriving: essentially, being receptive to one's act of care.[18]

Mothers and Daughters: Making, Matrilineage, and the Stakes of Modern Motherhood," in *Picturing Motherhood Now*, Emily Liebert and Nadiah Rivera Fellah, eds, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021, 26-45.

[17] Books such as *Eye Mama* (ed. Arieli Karni) and *Home Truths* (ed. Susan Bright), both referenced in this paper's bibliography, focus exclusively on photography, while the works in *Picturing Motherhood Now* (Emily Liebert and Nadiah Rivera Fellah, eds) and *Motherhood* (ed. Ann Coxon) are predominantly paintings and photographs; in *Unravelling Women's Art* (P.L. Henderson), there is a single cursory reference to motherhood with mention of Louise Bourgeois' association of the spider, as weaver, with mothers.

[18] I feel it necessary here to identify myself as a mother who has breast- and bottle-fed her children. My entry into motherhood was with twins in 2007, and after some days of their losing weight following their birth, I was encouraged to supplement with formula, and did for their nighttime bottle, initially as a temporary measure, and with acceptance, as an enduring practice through their first year. They breastfed until 11 months old, with one of them preferring breastmilk via bottle, so I was preparing formula, pumping, and nursing in that year. My countertop electric bottle steamer was an invaluable time- and labour-saver, and the privilege of being able to afford liquid formula that was easier to prepare warrants recognition as well. Scottish painter Caroline Walker, in a work she has

Concerning terminology, chestfeeding is a term preferred by trans and nonbinary parents, and my exclusion of chestfeeding is in part the result of not finding art speaking to this aspect of trans and nonbinary parenthood, and also to my interest in how concepts of femininity and womanhood are intertwined with breastfeeding and textile art.[19] While most of the works I discuss here include clear markers of conventional femininity, such as long hair and floral fabrics, works like Davies' *Visibly Mending* are quite gender-inclusive, and this enriches possible viewer experiences of the work. I want to see chestfeeding art and hear stories of chestfeeders; as with explorations of the qualitative experiences of pumping and bottle feeding, this is an area of study worth pursuing.[20] The qualitative experiences of breastfeeding itself have been dramatically underinvestigated, with most research about the relationship interested in quantifying breastfeeding rates in populations; only since the beginning of this century does it appear that research in the social and medical sciences has sought to explore women's experiences of breastfeeding.[21] It is my hope that research like mine helps further open doors to more inclusive and expansive accounts of the embodied experiences of parents of all genders in private and domestic settings in child-feeding and beyond.

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called "both self-portrait and still life" entitled *My Bottles and Pumps* (Fig. 5), depicts bottles, lids, and nipples drying in a dish rack in the morning light of her kitchen. See @carolinewalkerartist, Instagram post, September 13, 2024. https://www.instagram.com/carolinewalkerartist/.

[19] Commentary on a February 18, 2024 Facebook post by Toronto Public Health that, in an admirable effort at inclusivity, used the terms breastfeeding and chestfeeding reveals the long way that the public has to go in accepting such inclusivity. See Figures 6 and 7. These are my screen captures from February 20, 2025.

[20] Artists like photographer J. J. Levine and authors like Maggie Nelson, referenced in my bibliography, are prominent queer thinkers who explore aspects of trans, genderfluid, and queer parenthood in their work; Levine's work's inclusion in the 2023-4 exhibition *Real Families* at Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum indicates a curatorial interest in changing notions of the family in art.

[21] Patricia Mahon-Daly and Gavin J. Andrews, "Liminality and Breastfeeding: Women Negotiating Space and Two Bodies," *Health and Place* 8 (2002), 61.

Finally, my focus on art produced since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic is rooted in my own experiences of struggling with those years of breastfeeding in ways that I did not with the children I nursed prior to that time. There is resounding agreement in writing about mothering and other forms of care work that the pandemic exacerbated societal inequalities and further isolated caregivers; Joan Tronto and Michael Fine argue in a 2022 special issue of *The International Journal of Care and Caring* that "While care may, briefly, have emerged from the shadows [because of the COVID-19 pandemic], the experience of the past two years has been considerably less enlightening than we had hoped and expected."[22] Such special issues and collections like *Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19:Dispatches from a Pandemic*[23]and *Eye Mama*,[24] to name but a few, have in common the goal of making visible various unseen and essential labours that disproportionately fall to women, and particularly, as such inclusive collections note, to BIPOC women. As I noted earlier, the rhetoric surrounding the isolation orders of the pandemic focused on these periods as a temporary suspension of normal life: consider, for instance, the initial slogan "Two weeks to flatten the curve" or, in President Donald Trump's terms, "Fifteen days to slow the spread" in March 2020.[25] This treatment of the isolation period, which was extended indefinitely in many cases, as liminal, is resonant with the way that breastfeeding is treated as a temporary period in which women are encouraged to limit

[22] Joan Tronto and Michael Fine, "'Long COVID' and Seeing in the Pandemic Dark," *International Journal of Care and Caring* 6.1-2 (2022): 3.

[23]Andrea O'Reilly and Fiona Joy Green, eds. *Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19: Dispatches from a Pandemic*. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2021.

[24] Arieli Karni, ed. *Eye Mama: Poetic Truths of Home and Motherhood*. Krefeld, Germany: Teneues, 2023.

[25] "Fifteen Days to Slow the Spread," Trump White House Archives, 16 March 2020, *https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/15-days-slow-spread/* Accessed 29 January 2025.

their appearances in public.[26] Alison Bartlett, who is among the most prolific academic writers on the subject of breastfeeding, argues that "breastfeeding can not just be a liminal time or space which mother and baby occupy while waiting for 'normal' time to be returned. To understand breastfeeding as such is to devalue and constrain it to a nether-land outside of normal life."[27] I perceive a similar devaluing of the period of pandemic isolation as a supposed suspension of usual activities and thus something that must be left in the past for fear that to do otherwise limits forward momentum or progress, and that such ways of thinking disregard the very real impacts that COVID-19 continues to have on many communities.

Marking the Unseen, Marking Time: Stitching Motherhood in Isolation

Davies, a mother of two young children living in Shrewsbury, England,[28] emerged as an artist on Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic in a post on May 4, 2021; she posted her first piece about breastfeeding—her fifth textile artwork on the subject of motherhood, with previous ones focused on gestating and postpartum bodies—titled *3am* (Fig. 3), on June 13, 2021, selling it two days later and donating the proceeds to the Maternal Mental Health Alliance

[26] I have noticed the appearance of breastfeeding pods in such locations as LaGuardia Airport in recent years, and have used nursing rooms in shopping malls in Montreal, becoming aware of them only when security objected to my nursing near a fountain in Place Montreal Trust. While I commend efforts to make public places more accessible and comfortable for breastfeeding mothers and chestfeeding parents, the pods are quite small and isolating: not a great step up from nursing in a washroom as women have long been encouraged to do.

[27] Alison Bartlett, "Breastfeeding and Time," in Rhonda and Alison Bartlett, eds. *Giving Breastmilk: Body Ethics and Contemporary Breastfeeding Practice*. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2010, 226.

[28] Davies neither uses nor refuses the label of feminist in her Instagram posts; I want to clarify that while she does not explicitly identify as a feminist artist, her works can easily be read as feminist works in much the same way the paintings of Mary Pratt that depicted, to reference a documentary of which she is the subject, the "everyday magic" of food preparation and other domestic sights, are a part of the feminist insistence on the recognition of domestic labour as worthy of art, if not itself art practice. See Kenneth J. Harvey, *It Was All So Wonderful: The Everyday Magic of Mary Pratt*, Island Horse Productions, 2019. Seeing Mary Pratt's work in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia as a teenager was the first time I recall being moved by art, so vividly did it visually recall watching my grandmothers work in the kitchen.

Charity.[29] It was around this time that I, newly and gratefully vaccinated against the virus, emerged from a long period of isolation during which I breastfed while performing various other labours, remunerated and not, including but not limited to teaching online, coordinating my older children's online learning, preparing food, doing laundry, sewing masks, mending beloved stuffed animals and clothing, and embroidering. Davies' work spoke immediately and tangibly to my feelings about the weight of these multiple, often simultaneous, and frequently so-called 'invisible' labours; in *3am*, the faded grey denim fabric is worn to a hole where the mother's face should be, speaking to the toll of breastfeeding on one's sense of self. In this work, the mother's entire body is made of a piece of denim that Davies previously mended with Sashiko stitching, acknowledging the way the body may hold the markers of experiences that may be traumatic and yet perseveres. Nobably, too, and in contrast with most if not all of her future mother-child dyad works, Davies uses a different fabric for the infant's skin, depicting the child as an entity separate from, yet connected to, the mother. As a person who was at the time struggling with Breastfeeding Aversion Response (BAR), in which the lactating parent experiences such symptoms as nausea, skin-crawling sensations, panic, and rage, I appreciated that Davies' oriented her art around a site of damage and mending and explicitly related her work to maternal mental health. [30] The works are beautiful but not exclusively that, which helps capture the ambivalent feelings that may accompany breastfeeding and also the experience of motherhood more broadly.

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[29] @k.errington.davies, Instagram Post, June 13, 2021. Accessed February 9, 2024.

[30] BAR, also known as Nursing Aversion and Agitation, was first reported in nonacademic literature in 2003, which led to the creation of online support groups; it was first empirically documented in 2016, though research on it remains sparse according to Melissa A Morns MPH, Amie E. Steel PhD, Erica McIntyre PhD, Elaine Burns PhD, RM, "Breastfeeding Aversion Response (BAR): A Descriptive Study, *Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health* 68 no. 4 (2023): 430-441. (I accessed the unpaginated online version at https://doi.ord/10.1111/jmwh.13474 on February 9, 2024.)

An untitled embroidery work in the *Maternités* (Maternities) series by Franco-Quebecoise artist Kesso Saulnier creates a strong visual impression of the simultaneous isolation of the nursing dyad from others and the outside world, and the physiological intimacy shared by parent and child (Figure 9). A mother sits in the lower left frame of the work, nursing an infant. Together, the two figures take up just about a third of the space, with the upper portion being the empty hot-pink cloth on which the embroidery is stitched. The amount of negative space, notably in a colour long associated in Western culture with femininity, conveys an impression of these figures in isolation. As in all Saulnier's other works in the series, and as in Davies' works, the mother's face is without markings to convey expression, but the angle of her head—a simple green oval—suggests she could be looking at her infant or staring blankly into the open space. Yellow stitching indicates the mother's long hair, apparently in two braids, and her lavender top is lifted over her left nipple, at which the infant, demarcated by pale pink onesie pyjamas and a purple circle for a head is clearly attached. The infant's left hand, the same purple as its head, touches the mother over her top in a way that breastfeeding infants often reach a hand up to twiddle or otherwise touch the non-nursing breast. In contrast with most works about breastfeeding that centre the mother and child dyad in the frame, in this one, the mother appears isolated and marginalized with her child. The work conveys the potential loneliness and isolating feelings of the nursing relationship as the mother must often remove herself from public view or face backlash for the exposure or even hint of exposure of body parts that Western culture has trouble divesting from sexuality; because Saulnier made the work during the pandemic and featured it with another series titled *Pregnant with COVID* adds another dimension to that isolation.[31] Still, the vibrant colours convey a vitality both in the nursing dyad and in the

[31] In the 2021 Demeter Press collection *Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19: Dispatches from a Pandemic*, Alys Einion-Waller and Maeve-Regan are among contributors who address the experience of pregnancy and birth in the

surroundings that assert the featured subjects as living and active despite isolation and the supposed maternal passivity of the nursing act.

Saulnier's choices of colours and fabrics convey more than vitality. The bright colours give an impression of dynamism to actions of mothering that are quotidian and repetitive. The simplicity of the single-colour representation of a given aspect of a figure, such as the green of the mother's head and hands, recalls the drawings of young children whose colour choices often do not align with realist principles and illustrates how minimalist lines can depict, as they can in the work of children, complex relationships and emotions such as the ambivalences that arise in the mother child dyad as two subjects struggle to define themselves within and beyond the relation to each other. That Saulnier frames each of her work with textile frames made from ankara (wax print) fabric tells the viewer that they are not just looking at scenes of motherhood but of racialized motherhood in the context of a history of colonialism with which the fabric is associated. Saulnier has identified her 2023 FOFA gallery exhibition *Tissues Fil'tisses* (String'weave Stories) that includes this and other similarly framed works as a response to and in dialogue with earlier works on indigo-dyed fabrics that explore her connection to her biological mother and her mother's native country of Guinea.[32] Saulnier's works acknowledge the maternal body as racialized and connected to past mothers whose bodies and work have made possible the

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early months of the pandemic: "Women and pregnant people are experiencing radical changes to the provision of care, higher levels of stress, and a lack of choice concerning important birthing decisions, such as place of birth and companionship. […] These restrictions will likely have long-term negative effects on the physical and psychological health of women and families. […] COVID-19 has affected people's perception of birth and their decision making and has increased their loneliness and isolation." See Andrea O'Reilly and Fiona Joy Green, eds, 361-2. See also Marla V. Morden, Emma Joy-E. Ferris and Jenna Furtmann, "The socioemotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pregnant and postpartum people: a qualitative study." *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 11.4 (2023): 716-724. https://www.cmajopen.ca/content/11/4/E716. Accessed March 20, 2025.

[32] Kesso Saulnier, *Histoires Mè'tisses. FIL: Festival international de la littérature*, September 2023. https://festival-fil.qc.ca/histoires-metisses/. Accessed November 14, 2024.

artist and her work; it is through such maternal ancestry that arts like embroidery and sewing are often transmitted, so the medium, too, furthers this connection. In *The Subversive Stitch*, Parker acknowledges the formal recognition in 18th-century European art of embroidery and other textile arts as connecting mothers and daughters, for instance in the oil on canvas *La Mere Laborieuse* by Jean Baptiste Chardin (Fig. 8), which depicts "a mother and daughter with their embroidery – the daughter learning the virtues of feminine industry from her mother."[33] While art historian's P.L. Henderson's 2021 consideration of contemporary textile art by women, *Unravelling Women's Art*, exhibits a bewildering lacuna regarding art depicting any aspect of maternity, mothers come up frequently in interviews with the featured artists. For instance, Jenni Dutton notes that her artistic practice emerges in part from such a history: "I lovingly mend for my family, a domestic legacy passed down from my mother and grandmother," she acknowledges.[34] This legacy is actively at work in both Davies' and Saulnier's embroideries.

Saulnier, who identifies as Guinean-Quebecoise, learned embroidery from her "second mother," the cousin of her father who raised her from age two in Montreal's Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood.[35] Saulnier's biological mother is Guinean and her father is white and French Canadian. When her father died in an accident when she was a toddler, her mother brought her from Guinea to Canada, and then returned to Guinea. Saulnier has not seen her since, but is aware of her mother's connection to textile traditions of Guinea, as her mother would send indigo-dyed fabrics and cloths she made for Saulnier when she was a child, and which Saulnier

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[33] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 1984, London: Bloomsbury Arts, 2019, 130.

[34] P. L. Henderson, *Unravelling Women's Art* (London: Supernova, 2022), 35

[35] "Kesso Saulnier Feels Like a Better Mom Because She is an Artist," *The Bridge with Nantali Indongo*,CBC Radio One, 23 December 2023. https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-167-the-bridge/clip/16031965-kesso-saulnier-feels-better-mom-shes-artist

has incorporated into her textile practice. Saulnier has spoken of her work as a "piec[ing] together" of the various aspects of her family history and her connections to both parents and extended family that have contributed to the skills she employs in her practice. Of her work, Saulnier has made the following statement:

> The creation of memory is my practice's most vital and empowering force. This obsession comes from the fact that, having been separated from my native country (Guinea), biological mother and father (dead) before the age of two, I have had to recreate a narrative of my origins with the materials that I possessed, inventing and improvising in the process. From this matrix of memory recreated has grown the need to record even the most trivial events of my daily life and to fix the people that I loved on grounds that would keep them from suddenly disappearing.[36]

Referring to her medium as a "*terre textile*" into which she puts her "roots back into this fabric," Saulnier adds, "Textile is a medium to talk about emotional things . . . . It's very connected to personal stories, also to the body."[37] While Saulnier may not use previously worn fabrics in her own work, she still sees the intimacy of the connection of textiles, and their relationship to motherhood; referring to her separation from her biological mother, Saulnier calls it "a kind of crack that my own motherhood sews back together and heals" through her art.[38] There is a reaching back to the past to stitch it into Saulnier's present, and a connection formed between Saulnier as a mother and the mother who birthed her and cared for her through her infancy, which is an ongoing and lived relation as Saulnier cares for her child. There is also a connection, through the act of embroidery, to Saulnier's Quebecoise aunt-turned-mother who performed the

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[36] Kesso Saulnier, Artist Statement, 2021. Accessed 14 November 2024. https://kessoart.wixsite.com/kesso/a-propos-about

[37] "Kesso Saulnier Feels Like a Better Mom Because She is an Artist," *The Bridge with Nantali Indongo*,CBC Radio One, 23 December 2023. https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-167-the-bridge/clip/16031965-kesso-saulnier-feels-better-mom-shes-artist

[38] "Kesso Saulnier Feels Like a Better Mom Because She is an Artist," *The Bridge with Nantali Indongo*,CBC Radio One, 23 December 2023. https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-167-the-bridge/clip/16031965-kesso-saulnier-feels-better-mom-shes-artist

majority of maternal care work in raising her. Despite these connections, the figures in Saulnier's works are alone or in mother-child pairings, removed from contact with extended families and other networks that can support new mothers. This isolation was not exclusive to the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic but makes visible the way that pandemic isolation illuminated the shortcomings of Western individualism and exacerbated the already isolating effects of colonization, racialization, and early motherhood. The stitching is itself a piecing together of lives and bodies separated by material and conceptual histories of Western ideological dominance.

Another aspect of this and Saulnier's other works in the series that further its disruption of Western notions, in this case of progress and efficiency within a linear notion of time, is her use of chain stitch for most if not all lines. A chain stitch is a good technical choice for curved figures, but it is time-consuming relative to a straight or running stitch. It involves the creation of a loop of thread above the fabric by pushing the needle from behind the fabric to the front and then re-entering the fabric at the same spot; the needle must then enter the fabric from below at another spot, through the loop, and be pulled tight to create the image of a single link of the chain. It is a laborious process that only slowly results in the appearance of a line in contrast to, for instance, a straight or running stitch. To an embroiderer, this choice of stitch is not merely technical or aesthetic but metaphoric: it defies the notion of linear progression, as one must put the needle back where it started, and emphasizes interconnection, as a stitch is only made by consciously entering the loop made from the previous one. This heightens the sense of interconnectedness between the figures depicted and within their own bodies: to acknowledge that there are processes at work within and between the bodies that transcend the simple point of attachment. A chain can be a way to secure something, and that is only as strong as its weakest

link; an infant latches to a mother the way two rings of a chain link, and a shallow latch threatens the infant's ability to consume enough milk and causes pain for the mother. A chain can be a symbol of connection and solidarity but cannot escape its associations with restriction and the limiting of agency: it potentially evokes images of incarceration or enslavement.[39] The retrograde and misogynist popular cultural reference to a wife as a 'ball-and-chain' speaks to a cultural association with a woman as weighing a man down and threatening his independence. Infants are similarly regarded as threatening women's independence and autonomy. Stay-at-home orders during the first surge of COVID-19 were understood by many as an egregious violation of individual freedom. A different, intersubjective way of theorizing selfhood makes possible the reframing of such orders within an ethics of care while still acknowledging the particular harms of isolation and the feeling of being unseen experienced by many caregivers, including mothers.

Chain stitching also resonates both in practice and in appearance with other forms of fibre arts such as knitting, crocheting, and lace-making. While the textile works of white South African artist Ilené Bothma that I address here predate the COVID-19 pandemic, their engagement with concepts related to motherhood, subjectivity, time, and labours of care and domesticity makes them appropriate to explore in this context and will ultimately lead me back

[39] Although Saulnier does not identify as being a descendent of enslaved Africans, to ignore the spectre of bondage implied by chains feels irresponsible given the histories of racialized women, and especially relative to motherhood. Enslaved African Americans were often forced to wean their own infants at six months so they could return to work, while obligated to care for and act as wet-nurses for the children of their white masters for up to two years. See Emily West with R.J. Knight, "Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South." *The Journal of Southern History* Volume LXXXIII, No. 1 (2017): 43. I will return later to ethics involving reading artworks by those from cultural or ethnic groups other than one's own. Speaking of the word "bound," African American poet, editor, and creative writing professor Camille T. Dungy notes, "Though we ought not forget the word's entanglement with the horrors of perpetual servitude that are a part of our history, to be bound is not necessarily a bad thing," and notes the bonds of family, duty, and care that should be celebrated. Later, in discussing subversions of linear notions of time, I will further consider the significance of reclaiming potentially painful histories. See Camille T. Dungy, *Guidebook to Relative Strangers: Journeys into Race, Motherhood, and History*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2017: 149.

to Saulnier's and Davies' works. In a 2020 essay, the first scholarly work to address Bothma's work, Irene Bonner discusses Bothma's engagement with textile practices in relation to Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject: that which "disturbs identity, system, order,"[40] it is defined not by what is inherent but what is relational, and "is perceived as subverting rules of subjecthood and society."[41] In Bothma's work, "Ambivalence and conflicting emotions – fear, awe, rage, love, defiance, discomfort, frustration, -- towards the 'maternal,' the 'womanly' and the 'artistic' are explored by various techniques that enact the 'time consuming, seemingly endless repetition of trifling tasks' involved in housework and childcare."[42] While Bothma in many cases does the knitting and other material work she integrates into sculptures, she also makes paintings of her own textile works and those of others as part of a concern, in her own words, with "the time it takes to build a relationship, the time of the domestic space, the time to grow a human, the time it takes to care for children."[43] In *From Boob to Bib I* (Fig. 10), a watercolour painting depicting a finely crocheted cotton bib trimmed with lace, Bothma is in dialogue with the unknown woman who crocheted the bib as she meticulously paints each stitch that has been stained with milk and saliva—bodily products of both mother and child—and reflects on the time taken to create a beautiful object that is designed for everyday use and figures in, in most cases, a woman's life in

[40] Julia Kristeva qtd. In Irene Bronner, "Stitching and Unpicking Ambivalence Toward Womanhood and Maternity in Works by Ilené Bothma," *Image and Text* 34 (2020), 2. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2020/n34a16. Accessed 19 April, 2024.

[41] Irene Bronner, "Stitching and Unpicking Ambivalence Toward Womanhood and Maternity in Works by Ilené Bothma," *Image and Text* 34 (2020), 2. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2020/n34a16. Accessed 19 April, 2024.

[42] Irene Bronner, "Stitching and Unpicking Ambivalence Toward Womanhood and Maternity in Works by Ilené Bothma," *Image and Text* 34 (2020), 2. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2020/n34a16. Accessed 19 April, 2024.

[43] Ilené Bothma qtd. in Irene Bronner, "Stitching and Unpicking Ambivalence Toward Womanhood and Maternity in Works by Ilené Bothma," *Image and Text* 34 (2020), 9. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2020/n34a16. Accessed 19 April, 2024.

multiple ways, including as laundry, until the child outgrows that stage and further differentiates themselves from their feeding parent.

The soiled bib in itself evokes trailblazing feminist work on maternity by Mary Kelly, *Postpartum Document* (1973-9), which exhibited, among other traces of Kelly's early years of motherhood, soiled diaper panels. The incorporation of bodily fluids in the Documentation I part of the exhibition caused tabloid outrage,[44] illustrating public discomfort with the notion of bodily realities that they believed should be kept hidden. In both Bothma's paintings and Kelly's photographs and accompanying texts, there is a calling attention to quotidian and repetitive acts of maternal care, including those crucial actions of feeding, elimination, and the cleaning tasks surrounding both, through media such as oil paints and photographs, respectively, that are conventionally associated with the so-called fine arts and sciences. In painting a stained handmade bib, Bothma enacts, according to Bronner, "the transformation of the substances deemed abject by historic discourse (such as female and infant fluids) into a more apparently 'coherent,' cultured expression of 'art' in the form of a painterly surface."[45] In her multimedia installation *Postpartum Document*, Kelly exhibits material items such as woollen infant jackets, stained diaper liners, and texts scribbled on by her son. The work tends to be credited as the first explicitly feminist work of maternal art to be recognized in the art world; in all the texts I consulted on feminist and/or maternal art history, Kelly's work is noted as marking the advent of contemporary art explicitly interested in motherhood, just as such texts acknowledge the cultural watershed of Rich's *Of Woman Born*. Notably, on one of the wool jackets in the series, Kelly has

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[44] "Postpartum Document, 1973-1979," Mary Kelly's artist website, https://www.marykellyartist.com/post-partum-document-1973-79. Accessed 02 February 2025.

[45] Irene Bronner, "Stitching and Unpicking Ambivalence Toward Womanhood and Maternity in Works by Ilené Bothma," *Image and Text* 34 (2020), 10. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2020/n34a16. Accessed 19 April, 2024.

printed the word "Intersubjectivity" (Fig. 11), along with a solid line and a dotted line meeting at a point, as well as the year she began her documentation.[46] The beginnings of feminist art about motherhood were therefore already establishing a challenge to the autonomous subject in Western liberal humanism. In her engagement with a material bib created by one woman and stained by the milk of possibly that woman as well as the saliva of the feeding infant, and her labourious reproduction of each stitch and discoloration of that bib through the medium of oil paint, Bothma reveals interconnectedness not just between mothers and infants but between women as artists and as mothers. Bothma's active contemplation through brush-strokes of the time invested to crochet so fine a garment for such quotidian use reproduces the profound amount of time dedicated to acts of care and helps reveal them as the "lived ontology"[47] that Bartlett refers to, that needs to be conceived of not as some completed work relegated to the past but part of an ongoing cycle of care work that sustains life.

A return to Saulnier's and Davies' works before I explore further the conceptualizations of time that I see their art not merely as illustrating but as enacting: both exhibit a willingness to express—and I choose that word deliberately—the extent to which bodily fluids are tied to mothering, as do the works of Kelly and Bothma discussed above. Confronting readers with realities of embodied subjectivity is not only achieved through tangible textile forms but also through emissions of bodies that interact with them. Exhibited with her *Maternités* series,

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[46] Andrea Liss' chapter on Kelly in F*eminist Art and the Maternal* is titled "Intersubjectivities," and explores Kelly's pursuit of representation of motherhood through a maternal perspective that disrupts the conventional gaze at the mother from an external, often male perspective. Of the wool garment referenced here, Liss says "These delicate and strong wool vestments—emblems of the baby's luscious and tender tangibility—bear witness to the complex psychic and bodily journeys the child and mother will endure." See Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 36.

[47] Alison Bartlett, "Breastfeeding and Time," in Rhonda and Alison Bartlett, eds. *Giving Breastmilk: Body Ethics and Contemporary Breastfeeding Practice*, Toronto: Demeter Press, 2010, 226.

Saulnier's *Femme en pleures* (Woman Crying) series depicts the mother figure with dashed lines emanating from her body. These may be in chain stitch possibly for consistency with the other lines of the figure, but also to illustrate a continuity with the body and a relative permanence through repetition despite the ephemeral nature of a given set of tears, measure of breastmilk, or contents of a diaper. In one such work (Fig. 12), the mother figure stands alone, though viewers must look closely to determine this, since her arm position resembles that in others in which she cradles an infant: in this case, she is cradling herself through what appears to be a stream of tears. The piece speaks to the emotional challenges of pregnancy and mothering, and especially in isolation, but could also simply acknowledge the mother as human and therefore exhibiting emotions of her own that need not be related to the act of mothering. In any case, the mother is a subject that is not placid and idealized but experiencing a physiological response, in the form of expressed bodily fluids, to feeling and experience.

In Davies' *Liquid Gold* (Fig. 13), a single breast, in chain stitch,[48] is depicted in embroidery on denim, with the woman's hand, made of a white floral print, expressing from the nipple a single drop of breastmilk. The milk drop appears to be cut from an unprinted section of the same fabric as the hand, revealing the connection between the woman's body and the milk which is produced for the infant. The title of the piece speaks to the value of the milk itself, and how precious it can feel even in small portions because of the anxiety of not having enough and perhaps not having the financial means to afford alternatives. Manual expression is one way that

[48] Davies regularly uses chain stitch in her work, which is at least in part a practical choice for curved lines depicting breasts, but also has the capacity to be associated with bondage. It can speak to the ways that nursing relationships may often feel obligatory and not entirely consensual; there is also the dimension of class evoked by the act of visible mending. Those who have had to mend and make-do prior to more recent middle-class interest in visible mending as activism have tended to be in the same socioeconomic classes that faced reduced choices in breastfeeding relationships given the considerable financial costs of formula and other alternatives. That this work's title refers to breastmilk as "gold"—a consistently high-value commodity—highlights the way that milk, like care work, would be costly if monetized at its value.

new mothers are taught to encourage milk production. In the work, the nipple is placed on a site of a previous tear in the denim that has been mended. When she shared this work on Instagram, Davies remarked that "Breastfeeding is not an easy route to take and here the mended patch behind the nipple calls to mind the physical and emotional pain that often comes part and parcel with the breastfeeding experience."[49] Such works go a long way in challenging discourses around breastfeeding as 'natural', which can create feelings of inadequacy in women who struggle to feed their children, whether it is in experiencing latch difficulties, difficulty with milk 'coming in' following the colostrum of the first days postpartum, and/or feelings of discomfort or pain associated with extended breastfeeding.[50] It is not a stretch to think that, given the signals of pain and healing in *Liquid Gold*, emissions like tears and sweat are implied.

In *Surface Damage: Shallow Latch* (Fig. 14), an infant in a white cotton floral print nurses at the left breast of a mother, with the mother's body being depicted, as is consistent with Davies' other works, in a worn denim. The fabric is aligned such that there is a seam with what appear to be frayed buttonholes down the centre of the mother's chest. What is otherwise a peaceful image of a baby nursing, its face turned from the viewer into the mother's body, reveals the wear that the experience of nursing can have on a body both physically and, implicitly, psychologically and emotionally.[51] The title of the piece references a condition when the baby's

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[49] Katie Errington Davies, Instagram post, 21 September 2021, @k.errington.davies. Accessed 26 January 2024.

[50] Initiating breastfeeding with each of my four children was difficult despite having become, by my second pregnancy, somewhat of an expert at it, and my recollection of not having enough for my twins fed into anxiety about not being able to feed my third child without supplementation.

[51] I bought this piece from Davies and have it on the wall in my bedroom at home. My six-year-old just recently looked at it closely and said, "Why do you have art of a baby floating in space?", illustrating that she does not read the mother's chest and baby-supporting arm as anything other than background, even though in this piece, unlike in *The Common Thread* (addressed momentarily), the mother's body is delineated from the background through coloured fabric. This brought to mind, for me, the "hidden mothers" of Victorian photography, whereby a mother would be covered in drapery so that photographs could be taken of the infant in her lap. Artist Caroline McAuliffe, another artist whose work I found thanks to Instagram, plays with this history beautifully with her series *Invisible Móôir*. See "Pink Hair" (Fig. 15).

mouth does not incorporate enough of the mother's nipple into it, which causes pain and sometimes bleeding for the mother as well as distress for the infant who struggles to draw enough milk to sate its hunger. Even without this name, though, the visual of the mother's body lined with holes that have been patched up and reinforced—Davies has mended the frayed area with Sashiko stitching— indicates the possibility of any number of stresses on the mother resulting from the challenges of breastfeeding. Denim, associated with its durability and its history in workwear, is also a "default" clothing choice of many people,[52] mothers included, which makes this fabric's employment in Davies' work evocative of mothering as work and mothers as the 'default' parents to whom the larger burden of care tends to fall.

In another work by Davies, *The Common Thread* (Fig. 16), denim accounts for the entirety of the frame, with pockets and seams making the work more visibly a former pair of jeans. Unlike in the other works of Davies' that I analyze here, in this case the mother's body is differentiated from the background not by a change of fabric but merely by the outline of her body, creating a visual tension between the maternal body as relatively inconspicuous background but made conspicuous through the act of nursing and Davies' choices in representation. Most discourse around breastfeeding addresses infancy, which renders even more invisible nursing mothers of older children, and mothers who nurse older children publicly tend to be more conspicuous if more rare.[53] *The Common Thread* depicts a mother nursing a

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[52] In Daniel Miller's study, with Sophie Woodward, of the anthropology of denim, they note that denim is "the only fabric routinely subject to distressing technologies such as fading and tearing," and that it "often acts as default clothing" Miller goes on to say that "blue jeans have become perhaps the first ever postsemiotic garment, in the sense of marking nothing other than their own ordinariness." See Daniel Miller, "Anthropology in Blue Jeans," *American Ethnologist* 37.3 (2010): 415-428. 420-1.

[53] Many North Americans of my generation likely remember the *Time* magazine cover of the May 2012 issue featuring Jamie Lynne Grumet, photographed by Martin Schoeller for an article by Kate Pickert. On the cover, Grumet meets the viewer's gaze in a look that is a combination of triumphant and defiant, while her 3-year-old son stands on a small chair to feed at her left breast. The cover was a media sensation that put attachment parenting,

child of a more advanced age, as indicated by the child's size and hair length than the usual infant that tends to be in images of breastfeeding. While the World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding until at least 6 months of age and continued breastfeeding alongside the introduction of solid foods through 2 years and beyond,[54] Statistics Canada reports that 34% of mothers report exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months, and does not appear to keep statistics of numbers beyond that timeframe.[55] As a mother who nursed two children through age four, I can attest to a cultural discomfort with continued nursing beyond infancy, as I faced a lot of judgemental comments from family members, daycare providers, and strangers, in part because I have never acquiesced to people's discomfort with breastfeeding, and have therefore fed my children in public as needed, including on public transit, in parks, in restaurants, and in church during a wedding. A common thread—pun unintentional but telling—of the comments I received was that I was infringing on my child's necessary separation from me: a concept predicated on a notion of autonomous selfhood as well as the idea that breastfeeding is a temporary and exceptional state in the lives of mother and child.[56] In the case of my third child, whom I nursed from 2013-2017, it had been mutually agreeable to both of us to continue, and we

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whose three main tenets are extended breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and baby-wearing, into public scrutiny and public scorn. See Fei Sun, "Behind the Cover: Are You Mom Enough?" *Time* May 10, 2012, https://time.com/3450144/behind-the-cover-are-you-mom-enough/, Accessed 20 March 2025. See also Brian Braiker, "Time breastfeeding cover ignites debate around 'attachment parenting'" *The Guardian* May 10 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-news-blog/2012/may/10/time-magazine-breastfeeding, Accessed 20 March 2025.

[54] "Breastfeeding: Recommendations," *World Health Organization*, https://www.who.int/health-topics/breastfeeding#tab=tab_2, Accessed 19 March 2025.

[55] "Overwhelming majority of Canadian women start breastfeeding soon after giving birth, and more than half stop within six months", *Statistics Canada*, August 4, 2022. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/1422-overwhelming-majority-canadian-women-start-breastfeeding-soon-after-giving-birth-and-more, Accessed 19 March 2025.

[56] As someone who breastfed for nearly a decade in total, the difficulty I had in finding enduring, professional, and affordable clothing in which I could breastfeed added to my sense that I was practicing a way of life that was not accounted for in the clothing market because it was anomalous.

agreed that her turning four would be the occasion to stop. I believed strongly in the exchange of the relationship and respecting my child's sense of when she was ready for things to change. With my fourth, born in 2018, by the time I returned to work from a year of leave, we had established a pleasant routine of nursing at wake-up; again at daycare pickup, where a truly kind and wonderful caregiver named Hind would set us up in a rocking chair in the vacated crib area;[57] and finally, before bed. When the daycare announced closure on March 13, 2020, my then-17-month-old daughter developed symptoms of a hand-foot-and-mouth infection and nursed obsessively in the first few weeks: the very weeks in which I was caring for three other children home from school, and trying to make plans for their online learning while figuring out what I was supposed to do when my college teaching was to resume. I resolved to wean her at age two, but by then the pandemic raged on, and she showed no signs of wanting to nurse less, and I felt that the antibodies she would get from me would protect her in the event of infection. Even when I urgently felt I should cease the relationship for my own wellbeing, and worried that it may have been harming us both psychologically given my extreme physiological responses to it, I was at a loss to know how to do so when she was home with me every day. There was also the ongoing concern about antibody transmission. Online support groups provided some relief as well as ideas to gently wean, but finding community in the form of artworks depicting these struggles was even more powerful. I was taking at least a selfie a day while nursing to document the myriad feelings I was experiencing and to remove, in many cases, the romanticism associated with the image of the nursing mother, but these remain unshared largely out of respect for my

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[57] Hind is a Moroccan-Canadian woman who wears a hijab, and I wish to take this moment to acknowledge that women of colour represent a substantial portion of daycare workers; according to Statistics Canada, 95% of childcare workers are women, and approximately a third are members of a visible minority group. See Sharanjit Uppal and Katherine Savage, "Insights on Canadian Society: Child care workers in Canada," Statistics Canada June 25, 2021 https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00005-eng.htm. Accessed March 20, 2025.

child's privacy. I considered a photo transfer of the images onto the many 6" by 9" rectangles of fabric that I did not turn into masks once public health advisories insisted on medical masks; I would embroider patterns to obscure my child's face while capturing my own expression. I lacked the time and resources to bring this project to fruition, but the works I consider here spoke to the experiences I wanted to convey. Returning to *The Common Thread*, which Davies made in January 2022, a full year before I permanently stopped breastfeeding: this piece makes visible the mother-child connection of extended nursing and speaks to the conflicting emotions of it. As in *Surface Damage – Shallow Latch*, Davies has positioned a worn-through seam down the centre of the mother's body, but in this case reinforced the holes with red stitching which makes them more striking and more associated with blood and scarring. One hole appears at the mother's head, and another at her heart, and another in the vicinity of her stomach, visible through the left arm of her child. While in Davies' other works, the mending is visible but more subtle and orderly, in this work the red stitching appears more haphazard, revealing a sort of messiness particular to *The Common Thread*. That the mother's apparent injury in the form of the damaged textile appears to be shared by the child makes visible that there is more than milk shared in the nursing relationship. Mothers often worry that elevated stress levels and hormones like cortisol can affect breast milk; I worried that my toddler could feel my aversion to nursing and had complicated feelings about the extent to which the relationship at times no longer felt consensual for me. At other times, though, it was a comfort, especially at a time when so many people were experiencing a complete absence of human bodily contact, to share such bodily intimacy with my child.[58] It is important to reiterate that the nursing relationship was not simply

[58] I had read Hasan Maham's *New York Times* article "What All That Touch Deprivation is Doing to Us," in which he explores the mental health toll of long periods of no-contact on Americans experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. See *The New York Times*, 6 October 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/06/style/touch-deprivation-coronavirus.html. Accessed 20 March 2025.

a source of grief but a deeply ambivalent relationship, the feelings about which were inextricable from the circumstances of the pandemic. I found myself reflecting upon my foremothers and the ways that historical realities and socioeconomic circumstances limited their agency,[59] as well as upon my relative privileges in pandemic circumstances as a white and white-collar professional who could work from home. The "common thread" referenced in the title of Davies' work refers, to me, not merely to the connections between mother and child literally made in thread to represent embodied and ethical bonds within that dyad but also to the threads of connection to previous generations and to others in the present time with whom one may be connected by a commonality, like breastfeeding or mothering, but otherwise have very divergent experiences. The mother's bodily scars can be a reflection of intergenerational memory including possible trauma,[60] as well as a reminder that others have their own scars that may or may not be exposed.

The mended clothing Davies uses furthers these connections through its tangible connection to past and other lives of individuals and of ancestors. In *Unravelling Women's Art*, P.L. Henderson notes that "the use of pre-owned clothing enhances a sense of those who once inhabited such items, establishing a human connection."[61] In an interview featured in

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[59] My mother, who had both of her children in the 1970s and was an elementary school teacher and the first woman in my family to go to university, exercised her choice not to breastfeed, but I have often wondered about the extent to which that was an informed decision and to what extent it was an exertion of social class mobility and influenced by a cultural dominance of science as providing superior solutions to infant feeding. My grandmothers both married fishermen and lived in rural poverty in Newfoundland and birthed at least seven children each in the 1940s and 1950s. I am not aware of the extent to which they breastfed, but I know that the material circumstances of their existence significantly limited their agency; to even think about concepts like autonomy and subjectivity is likely a luxury afforded by my significantly more comfortable middle-class life.

[60] Integral to my thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic is that it needs acknowledgement as a trauma felt individually and collectively by many. A 2025 book, *When the City Stopped*, by Robert W. Snyder explores the stories of front-line workers in New York City during the early days of the pandemic and emphasizes the importance of remembering the actions of such workers.

[61] P. L. Henderson, *Unravelling Women's Art*, London: Supernova, 2022. 221.

Henderson's book, artist Vanessa Barragão addresses her choice of used textiles in her work as likely being related to her losing her father at a young age and choosing to wear his shirts as a way of remaining close to him:

> My materials often have a former life […]. When they come to me, I give them a new life as a part of my artwork. Every shirt has held a loving heart inside. And I like to think that a little trace of this love, or the emotions of the past wearer, are still left in the shirt, giving some energy to my artwork.[62]

Davies' work integrates previously worn and previously mended clothing both of herself and her children, giving these garments so intimately tied to daily life a continued presence, and connecting them through thread, making visible the ongoing interconnectedness of mothers and children based on those early days of care.

Fabrics of Lives, Sites and Acts of Labour

Another textile of significance to the nursing relationship is the bedsheet, and it has been powerfully employed by photographer Tabitha Soren in recent exhibitions of her *Motherload* series, which is among the more publicly exhibited contemporary artworks depicting motherhood.[63] Soren's children were well past infancy when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, but the time in isolation made her turn to 400 photographs she had taken with a remote-controlled camera fixed in her bedroom during her youngest child's first year in 2006-7. In the 2022 series, Soren compiles them in a variety of ways that she says, "is not meant to

[62] P. L. Henderson, *Unravelling Women's Art*, London: Supernova, 2022. 225.

[63] Photographs from the series are featured in the photography collection *Eye Mama*, whose inception was in images shared by women via Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as recently on exhibition in Hettie Judah's group exhibition *Acts of Creation* in the UK, related to her release of a book by the same name.

capture a singular moment of care or tenderness, but instead aims to share the blur of cumulative, almost unregistered days of hazy, repetitive gestures of newborn parenting life."[64] The series has an ethereal quality as multiple versions of herself and her infant appear in various permutations of relation. There is tension between the intangibility of these cumulative ephemeral moments and the physicality of the bodies of mother and child. The amount of activity evident in, to take as an example, "One night of nursing" (Figure 17) illustrates the restlessness and repetitive labour of the nursing relationship. The infant's body appears to circle that of the mother like a planet orbiting the sun, and, notably, there is no visible trace of the infant attached to the breast. In Soren's photographs I see, in the overlapping time-lapse images themselves and her compiling them more than a decade after her last nursing experience, a visible challenge to the linearity of time, depicting not only the hazy timelessness of newborn life but the reaching back to consider the ongoing effect of those times on her identity as an artist and mother. Soren's recent incorporation of bedsheets into her exhibition of these photographs has furthered their power and justifies my inclusion of her work here. In 2023, at New York City's Javits Center, Soren exhibited prints of her photos on full-sized flat sheets, and hung them on a series of lines to resemble that of hanging laundry in an exhibit called *The Mind Baby Problem* (Fig. 18): the title itself alludes Cartesian dualism with its assumption of the separateness of the mind and body that pervades Western notions of selfhood. Bedsheets are especially appropriate as a textile choice given that Soren's bed was the site of all of the photographs she compiled for *Motherload*, and is the site in which nursing is commonly practiced both at night and beyond. The exhibition in the form of laundry lines—and not even one continuous line that would suggest order and sequence as opposed to chaos and cycle—connects acts of care with domestic labour, themselves often the

[64] Tabitha Soren, *Motherload*, Tabitha Soren artist site, https://www.tabithasoren.com/work/motherload. Accessed 18 March 2024.

domain of women, and the necessity of routine laundering of textiles that are regularly and intimately in contact with bodies. The exhibition at Javits Center is especially significant given that site's prominent role as not only a COVID-19 vaccination hub but the largest mass vaccination site in the United States,[65] and connects Soren's work, inspired by the isolation of the pandemic, spatially to that time by bringing physical images of private acts of care into a public place, thereby connecting individual and collective subjectivities through the shared experience of the pandemic.

Both Saulnier and Davies also employ the bed in their works as a site of nurturing in the form of breastfeeding and co-sleeping: the latter itself a fraught topic in Western concepts of parenting.[66] Most images of breastfeeding in art feature a woman seated with an infant, so the depiction of the intimate space of the bed, in which so much of early acts of motherhood occur, is itself vital and groundbreaking in the context of art history. In one work in Saulnier's *Maternités* series (Fig. 19), she depicts the newly postpartum mother holding her capped infant skin-to-skin in a hospital bed in what is likely the first 24-48 hours following birth. The mother's right breast, including the nipple, is exposed, likely revealing the temporal proximity of nursing. Lines leading from the mother's arms beyond the frame help establish the hospital setting of this scene: at least one line appears to be a blood pressure monitor due to the band on the right arm,

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[65] Capt. Robin Allen and Mark Getman, "New York National Guard closing down mass vaccination site," *U.S. Army* July 12, 2021. https://www.army.mil/article/248376/new_york_national_guard_closing_down_mass_vaccination_site. Accessed 19 March 2025.

[66] A study of Canadian mothers in 2015-2016 found that 33% of women reported that their infant had daily or nearly daily shared a sleep surface with another person. The authors of the study, affiliated with Statistics Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada, note that most public health guidance in Canada advises against the practice, while proponents argue that there are substantial benefits and that the risks are low in the absence of other factors. See Heather, Gilmour, Pamela L Ramage-Morin, and Suzy L Wong. "Infant Bed Sharing in Canada." *Health Reports* 30.7 (2019):13-19. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31314125/. Accessed 19 March 2025.

and the other could be an IV. These make visible an extremely intimate time when the mother is experiencing vast bodily changes that require monitoring for her health just as the baby's vital signs are also regularly checked. Even though it depicts a bed in an institutional setting, the work reminds viewers of the integral role the bed has as a site of the earliest acts of maternal care.

Co-sleeping or bed sharing, as it is called in Western terms,[67] is a tenet of so-called attachment parenting that also includes the tenet of breastfeeding, and the two are often performed simultaneously. While commonly practiced among peoples of the global majority, co-sleeping is contentious in North America as medical authorities such as the Canadian Paediatric Society advise parents that the safest place for an infant to sleep in the first six months, when exclusive breastfeeding is encouraged, is alone, on their back, in a separate crib or bassinet.[68] In *In Your Arms* (Fig. 20), Davies depicts an idealized image of a mother, this one with facial features, looking lovingly at her infant who nurses peacefully at her breast while both recline on a bed, and while a seam on the black fabric indicates her medium of previously worn clothing, this work has neither sign of wear nor mending. In *Sweet Sleep*, (Fig. 21) however, the mother's head being held together by a web of darning illustrates her mind being at odds with the otherwise peaceful scene. She is not actively nursing, but the infant's face is lined up with the breast, suggesting that this depicts a moment after the infant has unlatched and the mother has

[67] In "Culture, Development, and Diversity: Expectable Pluralism, Conflict, and Similarity," anthropologist Thomas S. Weisner notes that "[b]ed sharing in infancy and early childhood for the great majority of parents around the world today, continues to be viewed as an obviously beneficial and morally valued practice. Children in many communities may sleep with their siblings, an aunt or grandparent, or their parents up to adolescence. But in the United States, there is a moral debate about bedsharing, entailing highly diverse and often conflicted values, beliefs, and practices." *Ethos* 37.2: The Organization of Diversity: Developmental Perspectives (2009): 186.

[68] "Safe Sleep for Babies," Canadian Paediatric Society, October 2021. https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/safety-and-injury-prevention/safe_sleep_for_babies. Accessed 19 March 2025. In the UK, the National Childbirth Trust makes a similar recommendation, though they start by saying that the safest place for babies to sleep is in the same room as one or both parents. See "Sleep Safety and Co-sleeping," National Childbirth Trust, 21 March 2025, https://www.nct.org.uk/information/baby-toddler/caring-for-your-baby-or-toddler/sleep-safety-and-co-sleeping. Accessed 21 March 2025.

pulled her top back down or up to cover herself. Although the bed can be posited as a place of rest and solace immediately following the primordial comfort of the womb or as a place where the infant is imperilled by the mother's body, these works trouble simplistic depictions and invite reflection on this intimate site of care work.

One work of Saulnier's that particularly invokes pandemic lockdown life is an embroidery of a mother sitting at a table with a laptop, mug, and what appear to be papers on its surface while a baby nurses at the mother's breast (Fig. 22). The figure powerfully evokes a common posture of pandemic motherhood, with a slight hunch as the mother's face looks down, potentially at the laptop but also potentially at the baby, and certainly back and forth between both. Because of the strewn paper, it is likely the mother is doing work on the laptop, but it could equally likely be a Zoom session with coworkers, a Zoom class, or a call with family members or friends. While mothers doubtless occasionally nursed babies in front of laptops prior to the pandemic, the extent to which pandemic life forced so many more hours of our lives online is underscored in this image. At the same time, it marks a very different context of breastfeeding from ways it has been conventionally depicted in art, and from how breastfeeding itself has been practiced through generations: my appreciation of this work is far from limited to my recognition of this scene as resonant with my own lived experiences. That is merely a starting point that opens up, as do Davies' works like *The Common Thread*, a contemplation of difference and of the pluralities of experience during the pandemic and beyond. I think of how mothers in previous generations performed other tasks, remunerated or not, while nursing, that would look very different from the image of sitting at a laptop. These works challenge the passivity and placidity that have long been dominant aspects of breastfeeding mothers in Western art. Instead of reinscribing a relatively static image of a supposedly universal mother-and-infant pose, Davies

and Saulnier enact time-laborious images of motherhood that illustrate its diversities, dynamism, and complexities, as well as the reality that for many mothers, paid employment must at least occasionally be performed in tandem with care work. That Saulnier calls one grouping of her works *Maternités* (Maternities) plural and not the singular term "maternity" speaks not just to the fact that the works comprise a collection but also resists the totalizing and potentially homogenizing of motherhood in a term in the singular form. The works are connected through shared textiles, colours, and styles, and notably of the repeated use of certain wax prints for frames of multiple works grouped together.

Another aspect of Saulnier's laptop piece is its evocation of a primary way that mothers not only worked but stayed connected with family and with other mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The laptop illustrates the way that mothering in our time has become less a community endeavour and more an individual one that is shared and witnessed online.[69] I spent a lot of time connected via my laptop or phone, with the former being easier for nursing because it allowed me to be hands-free. As I referenced earlier, social media was a place where I accessed support groups related to aspects of mothering, but also where I witnessed a lot of judgement of mothers, and where I knew, at least in the case of Facebook, that a ban on depiction of nipples on women meant that many nursing images were censored or removed. I also joined groups dedicated to quilting and embroidery, and it was in such a group on Facebook that I first saw the work of Katie Errington Davies. Immediately, I considered that work like hers was a way to make nursing visible without subjecting mothers to censorship or public criticism, and without

[69] I have been reflecting a lot on being in the first generation of parents to have social media; while Facebook preexisted my motherhood, I did not join until several months after becoming a mother. I am grateful to have had my parenthood preexist the vast number of apps now dedicated to tracking pregnancy and infancy and remain uncomfortable, for one, about its implications for reducing intersubjective encounters to data. See Amanda Hess, *Second Life: Having a Child in the Digital Age* (New York: Doubleday, 2025).

inviting some of the issues concerning consent in the depiction of infants in nursing relationships. It also helped me consider that, like motherhood, embroidery was once an endeavour that could be solitary but was often done in groups; Parker says that "sewing allowed women to sit together without feeling they were neglecting their families, wasting time or betraying their husbands by maintaining independent social bonds."[70] Through the internet, I felt a connection with other mothers and makers, but the virtual nature of this connection was a reminder of the missing tangibility of the presence of another person; however, we did have our needlework in hand: one of several common threads connecting our experiences and also connecting us to foremothers who did such work, albeit in a different time before such virtual connections were possible. I felt actively Glenn Adamson's assertion that "craft can be a powerful mediator between the present and the past, and therefore between the individual and the collective."[71] Saulnier's and Errington Davies' contemporary needleworks depicting a relationship as old as humanity are such mediators.

In her essay "Time's Place," CUNY professor and care theorist Joan Tronto examines the role that a consideration of time has in feminist ethics.[72] She argues for a greater consideration of the past in feminist theory, which tends to be oriented towards the future and risks accepting "the current fashion of time that moves only forward and in a compressed way."[73] While examining the perils of focusing on the past and holding it as authoritative, Tronto ultimately advocates for

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[70] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 1984, London: Bloomsbury Arts, 2019, 14-15.

[71] Glenn Adamson, The Invention of Craft, Bloomsbury Arts (New York: 2013), 210.

[72] Joan Tronto, "Time's Place." *Feminist Theory* 4.2 (2003): 119-138. I am indebted to the work of Alison Bartlett, referenced elsewhere here in relation to time, for pointing me to this essay.

[73] Joan Tronto, "Time's Place." *Feminist Theory* 4.2 (2003): 133.

Hannah Arendt's notion of remembrance.[74] Tronto argues that "while it may not be the case that 'history repeats itself', there are moral and political dangers in assuming that we can forget the past and disconnect from it so simply. . . . [N]o morally decent society will try to break itself off from the past, to lose the power of remembrance, as Arendt put it, which allows us to make connections and make life meaningful."[75] It is this power of remembrance that is at work in the embroidery artworks I analyze above: the fabric choices and medium both evoke matrilineal connections to the past without purely romanticizing them and make visible an act of relation that connects subjects to past ancestors and future descendants. Because of Davies' and Saulnier's making these works in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is also the insistence on making visible and tangible the care work performed by mothers and the psychological complexities of sustaining life through quotidian, repetitive, and essential acts of care. It is an act of remembrance, as in Soren's work, of time put into developing a relationship in infancy, and a remembrance of the isolation of lockdowns.

Interdependence in Nonlinear Time: Not Intellectual Progression but a Return to Embodiment

The concept of time and its relation to cycles and to plurality of experience is evident in many Indigenous knowledge systems. Kalaaleq artist and curator Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory has said, regarding her relationship with her children, "We're trained in the Western sense to think of time as linear, with the whole ideology of progression. But I really don't see that in the way we live our lives. Like, my ovaries were fully developed when I was inside my mother's

[74] Joan Tronto, "Time's Place." *Feminist Theory* 4.2 (2003): 131.

[75] Joan Tronto, "Time's Place." *Feminist Theory* 4.2 (2003): 132.

body. It's like two mirrors facing each other. It's this infinity, back and forth."[76] Nishnaabeg author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson expresses a similar notion of time when she tells a story of how her people came to know of maple syrup: "Nishnaabeg conceptualizations of time and space present an on-going intervention to linear thinking – this story happens in various incarnations all over our territory every year in March when the Nishnaabeg return to the sugar bush".[77] This notion of remembering and reliving, then, resonates with other ways of knowing, such as within Indigenous cultures,[78] and remind those of us educated within Western ideologies that other ways of theorizing our experience are themselves not new but ancient and survive in the present thanks to those who have fought to actively maintain cultural connections despite colonial violence and oppression.

Similarly, scholars Mariam Rashid and Korina M Jocson draw upon Jeong-Un Rhee's concept of rememory to argue for a decolonial approach to knowledge:

> Rememory, both as verb and noun, is the act of remembering and forgetting (Rhee, 2021). Rememory is fluid with the past, present, and future. We have chosen (to) rememory so as to loosen the grip of static identities in doing inquiry. The remembering and the forgetting allow a different kind of thinking and enacting research, perhaps more bold and open to different possibilities.[79]

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[76] "Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory," *In the Making* Season 2, Episode 7, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, September 27, 2019. African American author Camille T. Dungy also reflects on this biological infinity of sorts when she says, "At once, and not necessarily in chronological order [my daughter] is a mewling newborn, an eye-locker, a crawler, a cruiser, a babbler, a talker, a proto-adolescent, a power player, a mortal body—and all this time, she holds insider her the eggs that could make her a mother one day, as she has made me a mother." Camille T. Dungy, *Guidebook to Relative Strangers: Journeys into Race, Motherhood, and History*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2017, 159.

[77] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson: "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation," Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 3.3 (2014), 8.

[78] My work is extremely indebted to Simpson's and Bathory's elucidations of time within their knowledge systems. The absence of Indigenous artworks from this study is not due to oversight but rather to my failure to find textile works relevant to this field. I hope to see work in future, ideally from Indigenous scholars, on this subject.

[79] Mariam Rashid and Korina M. Jocson, "Postcolonial M/Othering: Poetics of Remembering and Writing as an Invitation to Rememory," *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies* 2 no. 5 (2021): 406.

Rashid and Jocson write collaboratively as part of their larger project of challenging the notion of a singular truth or single story of any human experience, ultimately prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that as of their writing "[p]ortions of the world's populations have received vaccinations, while many more of our kin in Other Countries are left waiting."[80] They continue: "we are two women of color [sic] who write because we must. To bespeak what is in our hearts. To name the haunting in this present moment. To remember as to not forget."[81] I do not wish to appropriate these women's wisdom but rather acknowledge the extent to which feminist epistemologies that challenge Western categorizations of subjectivity and time are indebted to the thinking of BIPOC minds and cultures, or at least, are not coming up with concepts that are entirely new, innovative as they may appear within Western epistemologies and ontologies. The works of BIPOC writers including Rashid and Jocson, Pragya Agarwal[82] and Angela Garbes,[83] provide essential frameworks through which works of art and indeed labour performed by BIPOC mothers, in particular, can be read. This notion of rememory enriches a viewer's understanding of the processes at work in embroideries like Saulnier's, as noted earlier in her statements about the sources of her fabric and of her embroidery practice that connect her and her children to her mothers, piecing together personal histories through the materialities of textiles and thread.

[80] Mariam Rashid and Korina M. Jocson, "Postcolonial M/Othering: Poetics of Remembering and Writing as an Invitation to Rememory," *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies* 2 no. 5 (2021): 401.

[81] Mariam Rashid and Korina M. Jocson, "Postcolonial M/Othering: Poetics of Remembering and Writing as an Invitation to Rememory," *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies* 2 no. 5 (2021): 401.

[82] Praya Agarwal, *(M)otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2021.

[83] Angela Garbes, *Essential Labor: Mothering as Social Change*, New York: Harper, 2022.

In speaking of understanding, however, I do not mean to suggest the possibility or desirability of doing so in anything resembling a totalizing way. As Rashid and Jocson say of their essay,

> We are not performing an act of disclosure but rather we are engaging in a collaborative and creative process wherein 'we enact and engender struggle,'[84] perhaps even as a practice of solidarity. For y/our daughters, this collaborative and creative process of telling-sharing becomes a living testimony to what is possible in the world we live in—a world full of many unknowns, a world that is relational built on/through/within forms of kinship.[85]

I want to consider the extent to which the embroidery works I talk about here, both by Saulnier and Davies, exemplify and embody this notion of collaboration and creativity as solidarity practice and not simply disclosure. "Disclosure" suggests the notion that the perceiver 'learns about' a subject, while "telling-sharing" suggests, to use terms from scholar Alison Jones, a "learning (about difference) from" a subject, particularly in the context of intersections between BIPOC artists and non-BIPOC spectators, critics, and historians.[86] In *Unsettling the Settler Within*, former Research Director of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Paulette Regan encourages non-Indigenous researchers like her fully to embrace the uncomfortable epistemological tension that comes with the realization that they can never fully know the Other; nor should they aspire to do so. In her recent book-length essay *Imperfect Solidarities*, art critic Aruna D'Souza adds to those voices raised against empathy and understanding as political tools and instead argues for a politics based in care: "I dream of a

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[84] Rashid and Jocson cite these words as from Katherine McKittrick in *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Duke University Press (2021): 7.

[85] Mariam Rashid and Korina M. Jocson, "Postcolonial M/Othering: Poetics of Remembering and Writing as an Invitation to Rememory," *Cultural Studies <-> Critical* Methodologies 2 no. 5 (2021): 407.

[86] Quoted in Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011, 27.

world in which we act not from a love of our fellow humans (and, for that matter, nonhumans)," she says, "but from something much more difficult: an obligation to care for each other whether or not we empathize with them."[87] D'Souza draws upon Édouard Glissant's assertion of the subject's right to opacity, which "stands in opposition to Western ontology's demand for transparency—a demand to know the other (whether an individual or a culture or, in fact, however otherness is being conceptualized in the moment)";[88] D'Souza cites Glissant's insistence that "To feel in solidarity with [the other] . . . [i]t is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to 'make' him in my image."[89] While I understand the shared experiences of breastfeeding and the making of textile works as points of entry into my appreciation of the works I have explored here, this is far from comprehensively addressing their meaning. I feel a frustration that such works may be pigeonholed as those that speak only to women who have breastfed or who long to become breastfeeding mothers; this sense of breastfeeding identity as transient, temporary, and private rather than as something that informs the self, has lasting effects, and is being practiced much more abundantly than it is witnessed is part of a cultural tendency to see the individual as autonomous and to forget the care we need as children to grow into the illusion of independence. While healthcare workers experienced some public recognition and gratitude at least early in the pandemic,[90] and prorogued workers

[87] Aruna D'Souza, *Imperfect Solidarities*, New York: Floating Opera Press, 2024, 24.

[88] Aruna D'Souza, *Imperfect Solidarities*, New York: Floating Opera Press, 2024, 52.

[89] Quoted in Aruna D'Souza, *Imperfect Solidarities*, New York: Floating Opera Press, 2024, 52. I have edited the statement for brevity.

[90] Shree Paradkar, Why the COVID-19 pandemic has pots and pans clanging with the sounds of defiance, Toronto Star, March 23, 2020, https://www.thestar.com/opinion/star-columnists/why-the-covid-19-pandemic-has-pots-and-pans-clanging-with-the-sounds-of-defiance/article_8ffd135a-9d48-5826-a546-14adceccb406.html. Accessed May 7, 2025.

benefitted from programs like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) in Canada,[91] family caregivers felt the extra weight of being the 'default' and received neither financial compensation nor public recognition for the enormous task of managing a child or children in a time of crisis at a time when we most needed solidarity. In Saulnier's and Errington Davies' works I see longing for more solidarity and community among mothers regardless of how they choose or are obligated to feed their children and a time-laborious, physicalized assertion of "rememory" that demands solidarity from a public too quick to seek a return to a prepandemic life that was far from socially just.

Trimming Thread Ends and Tightening the Hoop: Final Words

In closing my argument I will return to *The Subversive Stitch* for remarks on the connection between maternity and needlework that are a reminder of how motherhood, like art, is culturally contingent and socially constituted, and has never been as serene as it has been depicted. Rozsika Parker notes that in eighteenth-century Britain, motherhood became a popular subject in all the arts, but that "nowhere more than in embroidery itself was the mother/daughter relationship celebrated and idealised."[92] In a popular 1769 educational tract titled *Domestic Medicine, or a Treatise on the Prevention and Care of Diseases by Regimen and Simple Medicines*, William Buchan, according to Parker, "voices the new assumption that mothers would have total responsibility for the mental and physical development of daughters, that they

[91] "Canada Emergency Response Benefit: Closed." Government of Canada July 22 2024, https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/cerb-application.html. Accessed May 7, 2025.

[92] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 1984, London: Bloomsbury Arts, 2019, 129.

would singlehandedly and devotedly form their children."[93] Parker says that "It was precisely because sampler-making and embroidery originated within the increasingly emotive mother/daughter relationship that embroidery, and the femininity it was intended to inculcate, became such a 'habit,' to use Wollstonecraft's word for the power of the ideology of femininity."[94] Parker notes that even if these relationships were idealized in the works themselves, they were "shot through with as much guilt, hatred and ambivalence as love," and that this was a crucial part of the hold that embroidery had over the mother-daughter relationship, which featured conflicted emotions on both sides.[95] While Parker is referring in particular to the shared-gender relationships of mother and daughter in a time of more pronounced and segregated gender roles, the applicability of these observations to the contemporary embroidery artworks I explore here is evident: the exposure of the problematic assumption that a woman should or can be solely responsible for the raising of her child and the toll it takes on women who experience the isolation of that expectation, as well as the conflicted feelings that exist not only in the child as it grows and increasingly separates itself from the nursing dyad but in the mother as she lives and remembers the acts of care to sustain another life. There is also, in the case of Saulnier's work, a direct engagement with foremothers through fabric and the act of embroidery itself.

Given my exploration of the relationship of acts of care such as breastfeeding to cyclical notions of time, perhaps it is appropriate to end with a beginning of sorts, from craft scholar Glenn Adamson's introduction to his book *The Invention of Craft*: "In their attempts to undo that

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[93] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 1984, London: Bloomsbury Arts, 2019, 130.

[94] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 1984, London: Bloomsbury Arts, 2019, 130.

[95] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 1984, London: Bloomsbury Arts, 2019, 130.

pervasive subjugation [of patriarchal control], feminist writers have modeled numerous ways of rewriting social history and imagining a more just future . . . ."[96] Adamson cites the work of Rozsika Parker as placing craft in a crucial role in such imaginings, and contemporary artists continue the work begun by their predecessors of locating and mending what artist Lise Halle Baggesen has called "the mother-shaped hole in contemporary art discourse."[97] By so honestly conveying essential acts of care that happen in the first years of life, before the capacity of the individual to remember them, these artists are making visible not just to other mothers but to all of us that care can and often does involve some self-sacrifice, discomfort, and even pain, and this has potential for a more realistic model of ethical interactions among sentient subjects that prioritize care over empathy. These works disrupt the idealized mother of art history—the Madonna with child—and interrogate the lionization of maternal self-sacrifice. What is now needed is for such works to fill the craft-shaped hole in contemporary art about motherhood and care: as nurse-ins are a collective making public of the act of breastfeeding, so can art—and textile art in particular—on this subject make visible what is too often unseen in galleries and museums and point towards a more just future that remembers and is based on an intersubjective and embodied concept of the self.

[96] Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (New York: Bloomsbury Arts, 2013) xxiii.

[97] Lise Haller Beggeson, *Mothernism* (Oak Park, IL: Poor Farm Press, 2014), 19.

Fig. 1. Katie Errington Davies, *Visibly Mending*, 2021, embroidery on visibly mended used clothing, 17.6cm (8in), private collection.

Fig. 2. Possibly by Sodoma, *The Madonna and Child*, probably about 1520-30, oil on wood, 79.7 × 65.1cm (31.3 x 25.6in), The National Gallery, London.

Fig. 3. Katie Errington Davies, 3am, 2021, embroidery on visibly mended used clothing, 17.6cm (8in), private collection.

Fig. 4. Katie Errington Davies, *A Catch in the Throat*, 2021, embroidery on visibly mended used clothing, private collection.

Fig. 5. Caroline Walker, *My Bottles and Pumps*, 2024, oil on board, 41 x 33 cm (16 1/8 x 13in), Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

Fig. 6. Screen capture of a Toronto Public Health Facebook post, February 18, 2025.

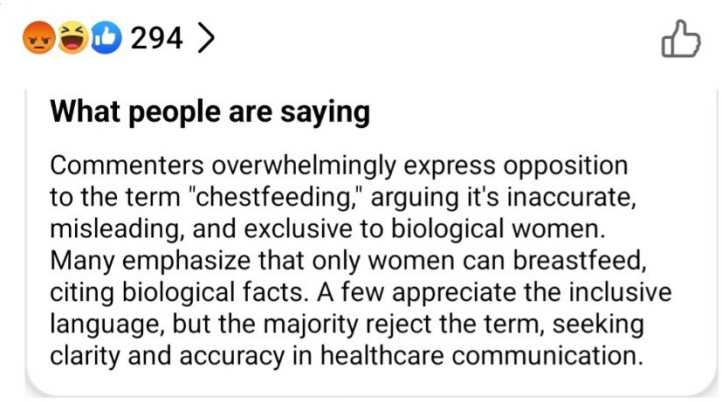

Fig. 7. Screen capture of the Meta AI summary of the comment section for the above Toronto Public Health post on February 20, 2025.

Fig. 9. Kesso Saulnier, one of 30 untitled works from *Maternités (Maternities)*, 2023, embroidery on cotton, 18 x 25cm (7.09 x 9.84in).

Fig. 8. Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin, La Mère Laborieuse (The Hardworking Mother), 1740, oil on canvas, 49 x 39 cm (19.3 x 15.4in), Louvre, Paris.

Fig. 10. Ilené Bothma, *From Boob to Bib I*, 2014, watercolour on hahnemüle etching paper, 50 x 35cm (19.7 x 13.8in), Cape Town: artist's collection.

Fig. 11. Mary Kelly, *Postpartum Document* (detail), 1973, perpsex units, white card, wool vests, pencil, ink, 1 of 4 units, 17.6 x 22cm (8 x 10in). Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

Fig. 12. Kesso Saulnier, one of six untitled works from *Femme en Pleurs* (Woman Crying), 2022, embroidery on cotton, 30 x 42.5 cm (11.81 x 16.73in), Montreal.

Fig. 13. Katie Errington Davies, *Liquid Gold*, 2021, embroidery on visibly mended clothing, 15.24cm (6in), private collection.

Fig. 14. Katie Errington Davies, *Surface Damage – Shallow Latch*, 2022, embroidery on visibly mended clothing, 15.24cm (6in), private collection.

Fig. 15. Caroline McAuliffe, “Pink Hair,” Digital Print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag, custom frame 101.6 x 76.2 x 3.8cm (40 x 30 x 1.5in), location unknown.
https://www.carolinemcauliffe.com/invisiblemodir/kc5pdhiynauvzntnjme3wv5na4ep87

Fig. 16. Katie Errington Davies, *The Common Thread* (detail), 2022, embroidery on visibly mended clothing, dimensions unknown, private collection.

Fig. 17. Tabitha Soren, *One Night of Nursing*, 2007 / 2022, Archival Pigment Print, 56 cm x 86 cm (22 x 34 in) Edition of 7.

Fig. 18. Tabitha Soren, *The Mind Baby Problem*, 2023, five 137.6 x 190.5 cm (54 x 75 inches) coated cotton bedsheets hung in the manner of a laundry line, Javitz Center, New York City.

Fig. 19. Kesso Saulnier, one of 30 untitled works in *Maternités (Maternities)*, 2022, 18 x 25cm (7.09 x 9.84in), Montreal.

Fig. 20. Katie Errington Davies, *In Your Arms*, 2021, embroidery on previously worn clothing, 15.24cm (6in), private collection.

Fig. 21. Katie Errington Davies, *Sweet Sleep*, 2021, embroidery on visibly mended clothing, dimensions unknown, private collection.

Fig. 22. Kesso Saulnier, one of 30 untitled works from *Maternités*, 2023, embroidery on cotton, 18 x 25cm (7.09 x 9.84in), Montreal.

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