

Giving Birth to Maternal Subjectivity:
Narrative, rhythm and caesura in an
autobiographical practice of birth story-telling

By Tracy Evans

Aberystwyth University
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SUMMARY

Within feminist scholarship there is a growing body of literature on pregnant and particularly maternal subjectivity. However, there has been very little published about women's birth stories and their birthing subjectivities from an embodied perspective. This thesis attempts to respond to this gap. Using a practice-as-research methodology that combines modes of writing and speaking the body (*l'écriture féminine*) and deep listening, I attempt to design platforms (performative and written) that enable me to write (and re-write) my birth stories in the feminist tradition of autobiographical performance.

Situated in the field of feminist autobiographical performance and following Della Pollock (1999), the main aim of this thesis is to contest dominant medical (and wider cultural) narratives of childbirth. However, this is attempted not by arguing against science-based scholarship, but by arguing *for* a creative-critical approach that is attentive to the maternal body, in particular to modes of speaking and listening as embodied practices. The process of re-writing dominant narratives in an attempt to construct the/a self has been a very common feminist practice for the last 50 years (Heddon 2007). In my thesis I have created performances as a way of generating agency for the author/performer that challenge singularity, authority, essentialism, and the notion of fixed 'truths' which support the dominant masculinist paradigm.

Through my autobiographical practice I attempt to create listening spaces in the live event in which I might hear my birth story/myself anew. I ask: Who is the one who listens? And who is the one who listens to my listening? What 'self' is responsible for these functions within me? How subjective are these 'selves'? What role does listening play in birthing a 'mother/self'? And, how can these 'selves' be constructed and performed? Ultimately, the thesis explores the question of whether (and how) a woman can alter the narrative of pregnancy and childbirth so as to conceive of a new mode of self-determined maternal subjectivity.

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION

1. 3 DVDs

- *caesura* (2013) Photographs by Jess Rose
- *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015) Filmed by Przemek Sobkowicz
- *AfterBirth* (2016) Filmed and edited by Przemek Sobkowicz

caesura (2013) has a root menu with 3 video files to be viewed (a time lapse of the performance, a time lapse of the labyrinth-making process and a montage of photographs) . The other 2 DVDs do not have a root menu and contain full length video documentation of the performances. These films should play automatically upon loading.

2. 3 Pamphlets

- **caesura**
- **Rehearsals for a Birth Story**
- **AfterBirth**

Each pamphlet was written after the corresponding performance. They contain reflective prose and poetry, and serve as documentation, exposition and expansion on the themes of the performances. Behind the front cover of each pamphlet there is a sheet of red paper, which may be placed behind any page if you need a clear background for ease of reading. Two of the pamphlets required some referencing, and rather than putting footnotes into the pamphlets themselves, I have used endnotes, which you will find at the end of the thesis.

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Bring the other to life.
(Cixous 1976: 891)

I see her walking
on a path through a pathless forest
or a maze, a labyrinth.
As she walks, she spins
and the fine threads fall behind her
following her way,
telling
where she is going,
telling
where she has gone.
Telling the story.
The line, the thread of voice,
the sentences saying the way.

Ursula K. Le Guin (2004)

Introduction

My refusal of consciousness...[was] trying...to contain the expected female fate of passive suffering. (Rich 1977: 176)

In her seminal text *Of Woman Born* (1977), Adrienne Rich shares her birth stories with her readers. She gave birth by caesarean section under general anaesthetic in defiance of what she saw was expected of women: passive suffering at the hands of ‘male medical technology’ (ibid). She chose to go under general anaesthetic because she did not want to remain conscious to play the part that had been written for and forced upon her. Rich recommends that women should come to view their birth experiences as a ‘challenge,’ as a way of ‘knowing and coming to terms with our bodies, of discovering our physical and psychic resources’ (ibid: 157). However, this is not straightforward. Suzanne Arms acknowledges that we bring our entire socialization as women to childbirth, which means:

after centuries of ingrained fear, expectations of pain, and obeisance to male domination, the mother cannot easily come to childbirth a ‘changed woman’ after a few classes in natural childbirth or a heavy dose of Women’s Liberation. (Arms as cited in ibid: 182)

What are the possibilities for the act of birth to be a fertile ground for a woman to be born to herself, so that her whole relationship to her body and life itself can be utterly transformed? This is not a claim for an essentialist ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ transformation. Rather, it proposes that a woman might have an opportunity to break free from a masculinist/medicalised narrative as a result of a changed sense of self during pregnancy and childbirth. Lacking an intrinsic value, childbirth becomes a generative act, producing life for both woman/mother and child. As Rich puts it, to change the experience of childbirth from an experience in which women historically have felt out of control and at the mercy of biology or fate or chance, ‘means to change women’s relationship to fear and powerlessness, to our bodies, to our children; it has far-reaching psychic and political implications’ (ibid).

The motivation for this research project comes as a result of my own experiences of giving birth. Like Rich, I gave birth to my first son by caesarean section under general anaesthetic. It was a very traumatic experience for me, and one which I had no way of narrating afterwards. This inability to express my experience doubled my pain. Each time someone would ask me about the birth, the trauma would perform itself in my body. For many years I felt trapped by the somatic charge that the memories triggered. Although my daily life and time were filled

with looking after a small child, my inner life and energy kept on being sucked into what I felt was a magnetic darkness.

In a recent international study of trauma in childbirth, midwifery researchers Reed et al found that ‘around one third of women experience trauma whilst giving birth’ (Reed et al 2017: 17). In a 2011 study undertaken in the US, 9% of participants screened were classed as suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), with a further 9% suffering from elevated levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms (Beck 2011). Whilst I don’t class myself as having suffered from PTSD, I certainly suffered posttraumatic stress symptoms. My journey to heal this trauma was more expansive and generative than I could have imagined. By engaging with/in the void of a dissociated, split-off self (what I will refer to as the caesura) through my performance practice, I found not only new ways to tell my story, but also a renewed sense of self. In these new narratives, trauma, although painful, is not ‘bad’ and cannot be essentialised. In this feminist critique of the ways in which women perform their birth stories, my performance practice has revealed (to me) that birth-trauma can become a ‘battery’ to power transformation.

Contesting dominant narratives

Outside of the midwifery field, anthropologist Della Pollock has written in great depth about birth stories and the ways in which they are performed through their telling. In *Telling Bodies, Performing Birth* (1999) she argues that birth stories are everywhere: they permeate our lives and haunt us. They take on a ghostly feel because they hover at the edge of conversation, they are barely there, and yet ‘all too much here’ in the body of the woman who holds the story (1999: 1). She suggests this is because they often contain ‘wide histories of sometimes violent knowledge practices’ which ‘rehearse the body politics at the heart of debates over reproductive technologies, genetic engineering, abortion rights, welfare reform and custody law’ (ibid). Birth stories, she says, signify a contest for control over ‘the meaning and value of giving birth of which they are, in turn, a vital part’ (ibid). Through her ethnographical research, Pollock asserts several key features of birth stories¹. Ultimately, she proposes that the dominant narrative that women use is based on a comic-heroic structure that demands resolution. Through her writing, she begins to explore a number of stories that do not sit within this framework and which undermine its authority. By reflecting on the way

¹ Pollock is dealing primarily with birth stories gathered in Chicago and Boston, and the south-east region of the US in the mid-nineties.

women speak, as well as the words they use, Pollock points towards spaces which are created for new narratives to be conceived that are not based on resolution.

Similarly, Rachelle Joy Chadwick explores the possibility for ways of telling birth stories that ‘disrupt and interrupt phallogentric representations of birth’ (2009:112). Writing after Pollock’s in-depth analysis of stories which do not fit into the dominant medicalised narrative, Chadwick explores the possibility for telling birth stories that make the ‘lived’ and ‘undecidable’ aspects of birth fully present in the way the story is spoken.² She attempts to articulate birth as a performance of embodied subjectivity, which challenges the ‘pre-dominance of an individualist model of the subject in cross-disciplinary childbirth research’ (ibid: 111). She acknowledges that even within the feminist canon, where women have challenged the patriarchal narrative of birth as a purely biological event, instead describing it as a cultural event, this description still excludes the woman’s embodied experience (ibid).

Situated in the field of feminist autobiographical performance, the main aim of my research, like Pollock’s and Chadwick’s, is to contest dominant narratives of childbirth which limit the ways that a woman might tell her birth story, and thus limit her sense of self and identity. Through a practice of aesthetic performance I explore the question of whether and how a woman can alter the narratives of pregnancy and childbirth so as to conceive of a new mode of self-determined maternal subjectivity. My study draws on, and contributes to research that is attentive to the maternal body, in particular to the processes of speaking and listening as embodied practices. Whereas Chadwick searches for other-than-individualist models of the subject to think about birthing and maternal subjectivities by looking to Kristeva, Irigaray, Young and de Beauvoir (ibid: 111), my exploration draws on the work of H el ene Cixous and her description of a feminine ‘I’. As well as dealing directly with themes of feminine subjectivity in her writing, Cixous uses language and form to articulate another level of meaning. She writes herself into her texts using the first person, something which she insists is necessary for all feminists and women (1976: 875). She takes language into a poetic register to continuously rupture linearity and masculine structures of grammar and syntax.

² Chadwick uses Kristeva’s theory of a ‘subject-in-process,’ drawing on Kristeva’s description of the instability and contradictory nature of a subjectivity that is poised between ‘the practices of body, society and text,’ and founded upon a ‘constantly threatening bodily crisis, in which the rational, logocentric symbolic is engaged in a struggle with the disruptive, heterogenous energies of the semiotic’ so that ‘the veneer of the subject unity is potentially constantly interrupted’ (Chadwick 2009: 114). Chadwick uses ‘poetic methodological devices drawn from the voice-centred relational method of Carol Gilligan and colleagues [...] to represent birthing subjectivity in alternative ways’ (ibid: 109).

In order to tell my birth stories in a way that enables me to find and express some truth for myself, it will be necessary to find ‘other’ ways of writing them than the traditional format of a linear, progressive narrative which focuses on outcomes and resolution above all else. These other ways of writing will take two main forms: the practice and style of writing the thesis (including the accompanying pamphlets), and the writing of the body in performance. Cixous outlined in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ that it is impossible to define ‘a feminine practice of writing [...] for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded - which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist’ (Cixous 1976: 883). Numerous feminist writers since then have found new ways to write their experience, which has involved ‘sweeping away syntax’ (ibid: 886), what Cixous would call *l’écriture féminine*.³ Rupturing and breaking away from masculine forms means ‘she blazes her trail in the symbolic’, making of it ‘the chaosmos of the "personal"- in her pronouns, her nouns, and her clique of referents’ (ibid: 888). The chaosmos ruptures (word) order.

Cixous’ style of writing has had a strong influence on my approach to writing this thesis. In my attempt to attend to my own (maternal) body through the research, I include a variety of registers within the thesis: academic, poetic, as well as reflective. My intention is to introduce different ‘selves’ in the form of rhythms into the language, in the hope that the reader may experience their own rhythm(s) in relation to the writer’s. The structure of the thesis is changed from a more traditional, linear model in order to emphasise the lived experience of rupture and non-linear engagement. I have placed three pamphlets – poetic interjections – at certain points within the thesis (which will be clearly marked for the reader). Doing so, I invite the reader to leave the main thesis, to go somewhere else, and to come back again. I envisage this movement of reading as a series of spirals that return the reader to the same but changed place, allowing the gaps to open up through the writing.

Finding new narratives

My objectives in this research project are to:

1. **Change the narrative structure** of my birth stories

³ See Furse (1997), Furse (2006), Mary Daly (1978), Susan Griffin (1984) among others.

2. **Re-write the narrative** of my birth stories
3. **Co-create the narrative** of my birth stories with my son/s

The foundation on which the research begins is an indeterminate one: I am working with a **shifting narrative**. The materials for my creative narrative are drawn from memories of past experiences, which are not solid or fixed. A woman in labour is in an altered/expanded state of consciousness. Her memory of what happened may be different to what actually happened. This, and the fact that my first experience of giving birth included a period of unconsciousness under general anaesthetic, creates a shifting foundation for a narrative and thus a space of indeterminacy. In narrating my own experience through a variety of forms and registers, I am also creating a **shifting narrator**: I construct at least one other self who was not present during my experience of childbirth. The self in my performances is not the same self as the one in my story. I do not re-enact myself as I was then. There is an evocation of the/a past self, which remains absent in the present. The multiplicity of selves created in the work thus acknowledges a non-essentialist self, who may be conditioned, but not determined, by material forces and shaped by cultural discourses.

Through writing/making performance, I try to assert agency from a non-essentialist perspective, meaning that I do not wish to claim that my experience can be generalised or presented as true for all women. The term ‘woman’ is complex in itself, as highlighted in Judith Butler’s argument that gender is performative, and gender identity does not exist before its expression (Butler 1990: 25). Whilst I acknowledge that someone may identify as a woman without being female-sexed, this thesis is based on an autobiographical methodology, incorporating a phenomenological perspective, therefore I write from (and out of) my own female body. Regardless of gender identification, I want to find new ways to articulate birth stories from an embodied perspective. Therefore, I am writing and thinking about the female body, yet I want to challenge the essentialist view that a woman’s experience of giving birth is contained only as a biological event.⁴

Much feminist performance practice is based on the premise of re-writing dominant narratives in order to challenge authority, essentialism and fixed, contained ‘truths’ that support the dominant masculinist paradigm (Heddon 2007). This can be seen literally in Carolee Schneeman’s ground-breaking work *Interior Scroll* (1975) and more symbolically in

⁴ This will be expanded in Chapter 2 when I consider the way that maternal subjectivity has developed throughout the twentieth century.

Bobby Baker's *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988), and also in Mary Kelly's iconic *Post-Partum Documents* (1973-79). These are all artworks from individual women's perspectives and perform their/her autobiographical and phenomenological experiences. Each artist re-writes the dominant (patriarchal) narratives of women's positions in society devoid of essentialist claims. Importantly, this process of re-writing does not result in a singular, homogenous narrative. Each woman coming to re-write her story is different and unique. Reflecting on a meeting with women who make live art in relation to their role as mothers, Emily Underwood-Lee and Lena Šimić emphasise that '[w]hilst there's a mutual resistance against dominant narratives in lots of our work, we recognize each other's specific struggles' (Underwood-Lee and Šimić 2016: 6). I present my performance work within this context.

Key Research Questions

Underpinning this research project are the following research questions:

1. How do the ways in which a woman tells her birth stories through performance construct her subjectivity? To what extent does this re-perform a birthing subjectivity, and how does it relate to concepts of pregnant and maternal subjectivities?
2. What is the relationship between speaking and listening when a woman tells her birth story in performance? What effect does a ruptured birth narrative have on her maternal subjectivity?
3. When a woman becomes a mother how does her sense-of-self-as-mother relate to other aspects of herself, and how might she tell this story of becoming in/through performance?

Through my performance practice I am attempting to create listening spaces in the live event in which I might hear my story/myself anew. Then a whole other set of research questions arise. I ask:

Who is the one who listens?

And who is the one who listens to my listening?

What "self" is responsible for these functions within me?

How subjective are these "selves"?

What role does listening play in constructing a "self" and subjectivity?

And, how do these “selves” construct, write and perform themselves?

Caesura (2013) investigates my traumatic (first) birth experience. In an attempt to move away from the dominant narrative of the woman-as-traumatised by an event outside of her control and/or a purely biological event, this performance subverts commonly used metaphors to describe the birthing woman, and thus changes the narrative, the story of her experience. I construct the labyrinth as a metaphor for the winding birth story. Silence and gesture take the place of language. The writing afterwards considers the ways in which my new birth story changes the story of myself. Crucially, in this performance the child is absent.

In my left hand, your tiny body,
Not yet breathing-
Not yet you.

(from ‘Surrender’, Pamphlet 1: *caesura*)

Rehearsals for a Birth Story (2015) investigates the relationship between silence, sound and speaking in what I describe as a field of listening. Specifically, I explore the physics and the phenomenology of interrupting sound as a framework for exploring interruptions in subjectivity, as well as considering the impact the sound of ‘things’ (cymatics) has on the process of subject-making. This performance features spoken language more prominently than the others, although it remains fragmented and shifting, playing with time through tenses. I performed it when I was seven months pregnant, and it places the sound of myself alongside the sound of my child in my womb. The expectant mother is brought to the foreground. We hear her waiting.

The story is writing itself and I am listening.
Sometimes I hear myself in the story.
I pause-
A phrase, a beat that I haven’t heard before.

(from ‘Writing our Story’, Pamphlet 2: *Rehearsals for a Birth Story*)

AfterBirth (2016) investigates the experience of a collaboration between mother and child in a performance that tells the birth story of the child. By introducing a second ‘author’ the mother’s story is immediately disrupted: she must now talk with and to him: he who was also part of that experience. Acting as mother and performer at the same time, I explore the possibility of creating spaces within my roles/selves: being far away from myself, being close

to my child. Thus, a key feature of this enquiry is a consideration of proxemics in maternal subjectivity: separation and stretching: being here and there/here not there/there not here.

Tender breath.
Stretching toward you.
Attending you.

I am present.
I am here.

(from 'A Letter to Myself', Pamphlet 3: *AfterBirth*)

Chapter 1 outlines my methodology in detail. This begins with an overview of practice as research, before moving on to a description of the various elements I incorporate into my practice, including autobiography, performance art, methods of listening and a somatic approach. In Chapter 2 I lay down the foundations for an articulation of a birthing subjectivity. Looking more closely at pregnant and maternal subjectivities, I begin to explore the relationship between subjectivity and language, before considering western narratives of childbirth. Chapter 3 traces the connections between trauma, witnessing and the speaking/listening body. I explore the philosophical ideas of Jean-Luc Nancy (2007) to help me articulate the relationship between listening, self and subjectivity, which I then consider in the context of autobiographical feminist performance. In Chapter 4 I present some of the thinking and rehearsal processes I undertook in making each performance, connected to the themes outlined in the previous chapters. Specifically, I explore narrative and metaphor in *caesura* (2013); rhythm and interruptions in sound in *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015); and collaboration and proxemics in presence/distance in *AfterBirth* (2016). As outlined previously, the reflective writing about each performance has been put into individual pamphlets, which have been taken out of this chapter, and inserted as performative 'interruptions' throughout the thesis.

In the final chapter, I ask: what are the potentials for new relations that might emerge from specific constellations of birthing subjectivity and performance aesthetics?⁵ Within the field

⁵ An original form of this question was posed by the MaMSIE network in 2011 in a study day that explored the relationship between motherhood, servitude, and the delegation of care. Participants asked: what are the potentials for new relations that might emerge from specific constellations of maternal subjectivity and *modes of care work*? MaMSIE (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics) is an academic network that 'creates spaces for interdisciplinary conversations about motherhood and the maternal more broadly' (www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk). The network, which is made up of over 100 scholars, artists and practitioners, has

of maternal studies, the visual arts have been prominent over the last 20 years, from Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Histories of Art* (1999) to the more recent *Feminist Art and the Maternal* by Andrea Liss (2009) and Rosemary Betterton's *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts* (2014). Performance art and live art have, on the other hand, been less visible or even less present in academic studies of the maternal.⁶ But a wave of change has begun, and my research project aims to contribute to this emergent field. Perhaps one of the starting points can be traced to June 2015, and a conference at London South Bank University: 'Motherhood and Creative Practice: Maternal structures in creative work'.⁷ (Having been invited to present, I was unable to attend with my three-week-old baby). As a result of this conference two performance scholars/ artists, Emily Underwood-Lee and Lena Šimić, took the movement forward and in the Spring of 2016 held a series of study days and events that considered the relationship between the maternal and/in performance. Several key texts by Underwood-Lee and Šimić followed, including 'A Study Room Guide on Live Art and Motherhood' (2016) and a forthcoming edition of *Performance Research* dedicated to the maternal (2017).

This new scholarship comes at a time of shifting worldviews, when new and alternative articulations of subjectivity are being born that move away from the 'reflexive individualism' that permeates our culture (Tyler 2009a: 4). New narrative structures for telling birth stories will help to support women to move out of the medicalised-disempowered narrative into which they have been written. In 2009, Imogen Tyler asked 'Why the Maternal Now?' Her rhetorical question prompted her to assert that 'theoretical and creative work on the maternal is central to the future of radical feminist politics: it is a site of knowledge which can really challenge predominant understandings of what a subject is and can be' (Tyler 2009a: 4). It is my hope that my research project will add to this developing conversation and help to generate new ways of telling and performing birth stories.

driven the debates about the maternal across disciplines since its inception in 2007. In her essay 'Why the Maternal Now?' (2009a), sociologist and network member Imogen Tyler states that the 'pressing reasons' why we need to '(re)think the maternal' are the ongoing 'discrimination in the workplace, unequal pay, inadequate childcare provision and the erosion of reproductive rights' of women (2009a: 3). Aside from the Canadian-based Association for Research on Mothering (ARM), founded in 1998, and the more recent US based Journal of *Mother Studies* (established in 2016 and supported by the Museum of Motherhood), there are no other organisations dedicated to interdisciplinary maternal scholarship (ibid:4).

⁶ The maternal has been considered within the field of drama to some degree, see Šimić (2009) and Komporaly (2007). *Feminist Futures: Theatre, Performance, Theory* (2006) edited by Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris contains some chapters that consider the maternal and performance, such as Anna Furse's 'Performing in Glass'.

⁷ The conference was organised by Elena Marchevska and Valerie Walkerdine. See www.motherhoodandcreativepractice.wordpress.com

Chapter 1: Methodology

Memories are ragbags. Methods can feel like madness. Life is ultimately lived chaotically. But it is in the exercise of telling it, trying to shape my story, that we may find logic and coherence. (Furse 1997: 43)

Practice as Research

The primary methodology I use in this study is performance practice conceived as research. Practice as Research (PaR), where the practice is the ‘key method of inquiry,’ is still a somewhat contested research methodology (Nelson 2013: 9). Like any other methodology, the artist/researcher generates data through the performance-making process, and is then able to analyse it and draw conclusions. However, one reason why this approach is contested has to do with the subjective nature of the creative process which could never be repeated in the same way, even by the same practitioner. If the rigour of research is determined by its repeatability, then I agree that PaR falls short. However, if the rigour of a project can be determined by the quality of the enquiry, the attention to detail through the process, the analysis of data in relation to the original research questions set, and the conclusions drawn in the context of wider practice in the field, then I believe PaR is as credible as any other methodology that may be employed. Furthermore, with regards to my specific enquiry, it is the focus on personal subjective experience made possible through autobiographical performance-making that enables me to carry out the research. Whilst there are several methodological options that I considered, all fell short to meet the needs of a feminist critique:

1. I could follow an ethnographic route (after Pollock and Chadwick) and interview women about their birth experiences, and from this story-data I could draw out my own conclusions.

*I rewrite their stories? Your stories? Her-story?
I write myself into her-story as an expert
who knows best
what to focus on,
what to draw out,
what to pin my pen on?
How do I listen to her story?
Does she have the words to tell her story?
How do I write about all the things she can't or won't say?*

2. I could analyse other women's performance work on this theme.

*there is none
none?*

*apart from the brief,
short, unheard of
texts
Brenda Clews⁸
Or monologues written by women
Based on other women's experiences
Eve Ensler⁹
Karen Brody.¹⁰
Of course they've been written,
dreamed up.
Just never published
never made public
never performed...*

3. I could work with other women to create performances about their birth stories, and then analyse them.

*Ethics?
Can you be sure that this research won't make people worse off?
Can you be sure that this research won't open up painful memories?
Can you be sure that this research won't trigger trauma?
I am not sure of anything.*

Or, I can use my performance practice as a way to explore my own birth stories. Strong academic traditions which privilege theory are suspicious of Practice as Research (Nelson 2013: 5), and I have experienced this at first hand when I have shared my research topic throughout the life of this project. PaR is problematic because it 'thrives on a proliferation of types of creative and investigative difference that always- already will tend to resist the incorporation into meta-schemes or systems of knowledge' (Kershaw in *ibid*: 5). Furthermore, PaR challenges 'the schism in the Western intellectual tradition between theory and practice' (*ibid*).

I spent a large part of the first year of this research project reading medical and midwifery journals on birth stories and birth trauma as I attempted to understand the wider field and to define my methodology. In one ethnographic study, *A Hero's Tale of Childbirth* (2012), midwife and researcher Gill Thomson, with Soo Downe, wanted to re-interpret women's accounts of a self-defined traumatic first birth through 'the conceptual lens of the hero

⁸ See Clews (1990)

⁹ See Ensler (2001)

¹⁰ See Brody (2008)

narrative' developed by Joseph Campbell (2012: 1). Working with 12 women recruited from a large maternity trust in North-West England, Thomson and Downe aimed to 'illuminate the adversity and dysphoria of a distressing birth' by highlighting the transformative and healing effects of 'taking courage, drawing on inner strengths, and accessing targeted support' (ibid). Women's birth accounts were then analysed under headings from Campbell's hero monomyth, which itself is based on Van Gennep's three-phase initiation process: departure, initiation and return (ibid: 3).¹¹ Thomson and Downe, however, did not take into consideration the nature of this 'critical lens' according to Campbell himself, who said that it does not apply to women's lives. In an interview with Maureen Murdock, Campbell said that women don't need to make the hero's journey:

In the whole mythological tradition the woman is *there*. All she has to do is to realise that she's the place that people [men] are trying to get to. When a woman realises what her wonderful character is, she's not going to get messed up with the notion that she's *pseudo-male*. (Campbell in Murdock 1990: 2)¹²

Despite their attempts to foster healing and transformation, by using the hero's journey to tell the birth stories of the women in the research project, Thomson and Downe become the hero/medical professional experts who rescue the women from trauma and silence only to deliver/write them into a male narrative.

Ethnography has evolved, and the objective expert is no longer the singular author. In the 1980s anthropologists James Clifford and George E. Marcus challenged the traditional objective fieldwork/ethnographic forms and practices in their seminal book *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986). This gave rise to a new approach to carrying out ethnographic research that 'opened questions about breaking the authoritative frame [...] in the name of such notions as collaboration, polyphony, reflexive inquiry, and dialogue' (Calzadilla and Marcus 2006: 95-96). As a result, in certain projects art and ethnography were interwoven within the methodology, whereby artists 'developed ethnographies of themselves using installation as a spatialization of self-narratives and critique' (ibid: 97).

Although my research has resonances with an auto-ethnographic methodological approach, I

¹¹ See Van Gennep (1968).

¹² Murdock writes that Campbell was suggesting that women become the patient, waiting handmaidens of men, like Penelope awaiting Odysseus' return. In response, she went on to write a sister book to *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2008), called *The Heroine's Journey* (1990), which outlined a parallel quest that women might take towards self-transcendence and transformation. Ultimately, she says, a woman's quest is for greater unity with their 'feminine nature' and that women learn 'how to value themselves as women' and 'heal the deep wound of the feminine' (Murdock 1990: 3).

wouldn't describe my investigative performance practice as fieldwork, and therefore it sits better under a heading of autobiographical performance. Furthermore, as this is a research project that is based on an exploration of subjectivity, allowing subjective experience to become part of the methodological approach is vital. My research questions are about how I can find the language and the voice to speak with, and my chosen methodology of PaR allows me to take a wide range of paths to explore this in a meaningful way through body-based practices. Finally, as outlined previously, there have been very few studies already done that explore the embodied experience of birthing women, so I hope that this study will be part of a growing body of work in this area and will complement other quantitative and ethnographic studies. In light of the above, I offer the following description and rationale for my methodology:

I begin with an **inquiry**: a set of questions that I want to answer.

I engage in a **praxis**, what Nelson calls 'theory imbricated within practice' (Nelson 2013: 5), or what I call **thinking through doing**: writing, making, performing, discussing, reading, thinking again, and making again, and thinking again. In this sense, all research could be considered a praxis.

I **document** and share this praxis by **reading and writing** about the subject (literature review/close reading), forming specific **research questions**, making **performances** (outputs), **filming** and photographing parts of the process and the final event (evidence/output), **writing** about them (analysis). I also **write from** them (output/evidence/findings). I **think** about them in relation to what I have read and previously written.

I **write** this thesis, and whilst doing all this, I carry on being a mother, doing what a mother does, doing what I do.

I consider how to position or **curate** the various elements of the study because I want the reader to notice the 'dialogical relation between elements yielding resonances by way of affirmation' (Jones in *ibid*: 7). I listen to the resonances between the various elements, and try to articulate what I now know: new knowing, new **knowledge**. This leads to my (in)**conclusions** (outcomes).

Notes:

I follow the rhythm of the praxis as it develops to present the research, rather than a traditional academic structure. It does not always travel in straight lines. Expect some

interruptions, some pauses, caesurae. I cannot contain all the findings, all the knowledge in nice, clean containers or chapters: they leak sometimes.

In the end,

I cannot reduce it all to a set of principles or a new, single theory.

I am not certain that the end is the end.

I do not know where all knowledge
begins.

I do not know where I
begin.

I return to the body, over and over again.

What does the body know?

How can I understand its language?

She hunts for your softness-
Following the scent of your beginning-
as hungry for your flesh
as you are thirsty for her breath.

(From 'Heartplant', Pamphlet 2: *Rehearsals for a Birth Story*)

Writing the Body

If feminists wish to convert bodily experience from the reproductive 'weaker sex' to that of the reproductive and productive 'knowledge and power,' I suggest we might need to work *from* our physical experience and find ways to articulate our embodied perceptions in the culture. We have to make sense of the world by thinking *from* our bodies in all their meanings...we need to write not only *on* our bodies [Cixous' hysterical woman]...but through, from and about them. We might wrest the gaze from being *on* us to considering our own gaze on ourselves, not out of individualistic introspection but because it is a matter of necessity if we are to grapple with systems

of control, not just in the media, but in science, technology and medicine... We surely owe it to ourselves to see with our own eyes, understand with our own flesh, and know with our own bones?' (Furse 2006a: 158)

Writing the body is a feminist term invoked by Hélène Cixous in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976):

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies... Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement. (1976: 875)

This discourse is more commonly referred to as *l'écriture féminine*. When a woman writes herself into the text she is performing herself, making herself a subject of performance. This self-determination demands that the future no longer be determined by the past and that the (feminine) new breaks away from the old, Cixous' '*la nouvelle de l'ancien*' (ibid). Cixous insists that when a woman writes herself she at once breaks up and destroys (the past) and foresees the unforeseeable (the future). When she writes herself, she produces a rupture, out of which comes her transformation and potential liberation (ibid). The ways in which women write themselves into performance was explored in a three-year project by Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris at Lancaster University (2003-2006). They explored this under four main headings: text, body, space and technology. Featured artists included Bobby Baker, Sue-Ellen Case, Leonora Champagne, Lois Weaver and Anna Furse and resulted in a series of workshops and a book: *Feminist Futures: Theatre, Performance, Theory* (Aston and Harris 2006).¹³

Anna Furse has been exploring the relationship between the (woman's) body and performance since the beginning of her career. In 1980, four years after Cixous' invocation was published, Furse formed *Bloodgroup* to search for a non-verbal syntax in performance in order to test whether 'there was such a thing as a feminine narrative structure.' She wanted to 'let personal and subconscious material inform [their] imagery' and to find out if 'the microcosm of the personal would connect macrocosmically' (Furse 1997: 41). Furse has continued to use autobiographical details in her theatre-making throughout her career. *Glass Body* (2006b) was a multi-faceted collaboration which explored what lies under our skin, and

¹³ For a fuller description of the project see *Women's Writing for Performance: Process and Practice* <https://www.lancasterarts.org/whats-on/process-and-practice>

framed by Furse's own experience of pregnancy by Assisted Reproduction Technologies.¹⁴ This production was a follow-up from her earlier *Yerma's Eggs* (2001-3), which explored the reproductive experiences of the company members.

Furse's theatre work is a leading example of how women/a woman writes herself into performance: it is not merely about including autobiographical details, but also must involve an exploration of language and structure. Throughout her career Furse has continued to explore theatre as a poetic medium,¹⁵ showing how in poetry it is possible to restructure language so that other stories and experiences might be expressed and communicated. Syntax and grammar can be ignored, broken down, destroyed. New word formations are born. Rhythm and the sounds of words are as important as meaning. Poetry acts on the body. Poetry demands more space (on the page), demands its own time (through its rhythms). When a woman writes herself through poetry she is drawing from the inkwell of her life force, her everpresent origin. Furthermore, when a woman writes her pregnant, birthing, mother's body, categories that are usually placed outside of social discourse, she is committing an act of radical transgression (Silverman Van Buren 1989: 14). She is, as Brenda Clews puts it, precluding the male, and therefore disrupting the Order (Clews 1990: 99).

Writing my body into/through performance and poetry is the primary method I use to carry out my research. This method is personal and subjective: how could it be anything else? It is disruptive: both of the medical-normative discourse around childbirth, and of my own sense of identity. It is generative: through the act of making these performances I keep making/finding a new sense of self/selves, and new meanings for those experiences which previously seemed meaningless. After each performance, my reflective writing 'came through' in a more poetic rhythm. What emerged were three 'bodies' of reflections and poetry, each linked to one of the performances. These pamphlets are positioned as interruptions within the main thesis. It will be clearly indicated at which points I would like you to read them. Alongside my autobiographical practice, the writing in the main body of the thesis and in the pamphlets extends, questions and reveals new thinking and understandings about the themes under investigation in the context of the wider academic fields. It contains both discursive and poetic registers. My work adds a new voice and

¹⁴ See also Furse's essay 'Performing in Glass' (2006a)

¹⁵ In her autobiographical essay 'Written on my Body', Furse writes of her time as artistic director of Paines Plough: 'I was hellbent on [...] encouraging playwrights to think of theatre as poetic medium' (1997: 43).

original thinking to the conversations on corporeal feminism within performance practice, as well as to the relatively new conversations which are developing around maternal aesthetics within performance.

Speaking the Body

What is the relationship between speaking and listening? Or, put another way, how does our speaking relate to our listening? I am interested in exploring this on both a phenomenological level: what is the experience of having a voice? How do we experience speaking and listening as an embodied self? And, I also want to extend this to consider a wider poetic-philosophical context: what are the rhythms, the metaphors, the silences of these experiences; what language(s) can we use to best express them? And, in the end, how does all of this relate to a concept of birthing subjectivity?

What is the voice of my body?
My body carries its stories.
My body speaks its stories

in every breath-
in every gesture-

Here [...] her body finds (and is) her voice. (Bacon 2010:72)

In her essay ‘The Voice of her Body: Somatic practices as a basis for creative research methodology’ (2010), Jane Bacon explores methodologies that she considers are most relevant for women undertaking practice-led research and allow for working with an expanded concept of Selves rather than just physical bodies (Bacon 2010: 64). Bacon explains the way in which she mentors and supports her students to find their own voice in their research by attending and listening to what Elena Avila describes as ‘the space between the atoms’ (Avila in *ibid*: 71)). Bacon introduces this process to her students through practical workshops in Authentic Movement and Focusing.

Authentic Movement involves a two-way process between a mover and a witness. The mover stills themselves and waits for whatever is arising, before giving shape and form through

movement. This is a process which is spontaneous, bringing the pre-expressive into expression, unmediated and unchecked by any conscious attitude of what one should look like. The witness takes up a position of stillness and observes the mover. ‘In the present moment both mover and witness are drawn to notice their experiences of each moment’ (ibid: 67), so that the witness is also not judging or critiquing the mover’s movement in any way, simply noticing it in all its intensities, whilst at the same time tracking the internal sensations within her own body. Although often difficult to express in language, this practice is concerned with ‘the slow emergence of modes of articulation *from*, rather than about, experience’ (ibid: 68). When the words come, they come like the movement: they arise and emerge from the body.¹⁶ What words does one use to speak the body? Using Gendlin’s technique of focusing, Bacon explains that the process of speaking the body involves waiting and noticing what arises. This is explained as the ‘felt sense’: it is a physical sensation, which is held lightly and with some curiosity (in Gendlin’s approach, the process involves asking questions), before we can actually name it in order to work further with it (ibid: 68).¹⁷ Ultimately this approach encourages the participant to listen for and to gather the threads of their experience (in the bodily and imaginal realm) in order to gain understanding, and so that the events of our lives pass into symbolic experiences (ibid: 69-70).¹⁸

During the research and development stage of each performance I engage in movement and sounding exercises that are similar to the approach in Authentic Movement, although I don’t usually have a witness present. I always begin the creative process working with/in my body. Specifically, I look for somatic markers as I explore my autobiography: moments/memories that carry an intensity in sensation. I understand this as ‘my body speaking (to me)’ - it in/forms the movements, texts, and soundscapes that I create. This exploration of the somatic experience is further developed in live performance. The physical and textual scores which I compose and rehearse in detail become a ‘container’ in which my emerging sensations can be given form and witnessed. I engage in a process of witnessing myself in each performance: listening, noticing and tracking my own bodily sensations. This informs the *tone* of the live action and text: my voice is modulated and my gestures are weighted by feeling, which is always live, spontaneous and never rehearsed. This approach allows spaces in the live event for new meanings to emerge. I take this into language within the writing which emerges after

¹⁶ For more on Authentic Movement and performance see Davies (2007).

¹⁷ Bacon refers to Damasio’s description of this as somatic markers (Bacon 2010: 68).

¹⁸ For more on Gendlin’s concept of Focusing see Gendlin (2003).

the performance. Importantly, this somatic methodology informs all creative stages of my making, performing and reflecting.

One key difference between Bacon's somatic approach and my personal practice is my interest in creating performances for an audience (who may or may not sit in witness consciousness). For me, the audience/other is a vital part in the act of revelation: the people I am speaking to; the people I invite to hear my body. Having an audience present invokes the socio-political dimensions of my birth experiences: it makes my personal story public. The birthing woman often has to overcome a whole series of power struggles over her body when she gives birth. When I perform my birth stories I reclaim agency over my own body. By welcoming and acknowledging the somatic experience as an act of revelation, I am opening to the lived experience of my body, here and now. I am allowing my body to be heard, by me and others, without censorship.

Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.

Write your self. Your body must be heard.

(Cixous 1976: 880)

Deep Listening

Cixous insists that your (woman's) body 'must be heard'. However, her text, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976) focuses specifically on the importance of writing the body, and not on hearing it, or indeed listening to it. French poet Francis Ponge suggests that 'speaking is already its own listening' (as cited in Nancy 2007: 35). I agree. However, in an attempt to articulate how and what I am listening to, I will conclude this chapter on methodology by looking at my practice of deep listening.

Within the world of musical composition, Pauline Oliveros has offered a very clear description of how the process of listening relates to hearing. Hearing is a physiological process in which 'complex wave forms [are] continuously transmitted to the auditory cortex from the outside world by the ear', whereas listening takes place when there is an 'active engagement with attention' on what has been heard (2005: xxi). Listening, for Oliveros, has both an inner and an outer world dimension: 'to listen is to give attention to what is perceived

both acoustically and psychologically' (ibid: xxii). Deep listening then, involves the listener connecting on a deeper level with what is being heard. It comes from 'noticing my listening or listening to my listening and discerning the effects on the bodymind continuum' (ibid: xxiv). Oliveros' methodology is based on two methods of listening, or two forms of attention: focal attention ('like a lens, produces clear detail limited to the object of attention' (ibid: 13)) and global attention ('diffuse and continually expanding to take in the whole of the space/time continuum of sound' (ibid)). Her practice involves listening with the whole body, from the palms of the hands to the soles of the feet. The depth of listening one engages in is related to 'the expansion of consciousness brought about by inclusive listening', which she describes as impartial, open, and receiving (ibid: 15).

Over the course of her career Oliveros has offered a wide range of training exercises in deep listening. The central concern for her in her instructions to others as they develop and practice their skills is to provide 'attention strategies' (ibid: 29). This is an approach which I have undertaken throughout the course of this study. I ask: what are my 'ways of listening'? What are my 'ways of responding'? How does this relate to myself, others, and my environment? In what ways are these strategies culturally prescribed? I have engaged in deep listening within a range of settings and contexts: as a tool for personal transformation (working with world percussionist and artist Nicholas Twilley);¹⁹ as a mode of releasing trauma (using Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing within a cranio-sacral therapeutic setting),²⁰ as well as in a variety of theatre and dance training platforms (including Butoh, Bodyweather Laboratory, and psychophysical performer training with theatre director Phillip Zarrilli).

Within the field of performer training, Zarrilli has championed the approach of training the bodymind, based on Eastern practises of yoga, tai chi and the Indian martial art of kalaripayattu.²¹ This training encourages the body to see with 'all eyes': there is an emphasis on expansion, alertness and following impulse. Zarrilli's Eastern-influenced approach follows other European theatre directors who have drawn from Eastern trainings, including Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski. Within these Eastern traditions, practices of deep listening are closely linked with practices of meditation and contemplation, both spiritual and secular. Oliveros differentiates her practice of deep listening from spiritual practices, such as Zen

¹⁹ Twilley uses the phrase 'The Art in Listening' to describe his practice. See www.theartinlistening.com

²⁰ See Levine (1997) and Levine (2010)

²¹ See Zarrilli (2008)

Buddhism, where attention, she says, is ‘directed to moral and ethical issues, values, beliefs and tenets of the particular faith and to connection with the divine, or a divine being, or beings’ (2005: xxiv). Within my practice of deep listening I want to engage all aspects of myself, including the spirit, without attaching this to a particular faith system.

Communal deep listening is combined with individual speaking in the American Indian practice of talking circles. The talking circle is a ‘traditional pattern of communication specific to Indian communities in which each person speaks individually and others listen’ (Strickland 1999: 193). This approach allows each individual to speak about their own concerns in relation to the topic, rather than being part of an interactive conversation (ibid). Working with a group of native American women in the Northern Plains tribes to study their views of cancer as a health issue, Sara A. Becker used talking circles as a focus group methodology.²² As an indigenous practice, talking circles had a cultural relevance for the women in the study. As well as featuring a number of ceremonial aspects, the process involved the participants passing a sacred rock around as they took turns to talk (2006: 29). For these communities speaking in this way is opening to receive ‘spirit’ (ibid: 29): it is a practice of speaking and listening that might be described in terms of the body-mind-spirit connection.

The ways in which we speak and listen can be culturally influenced, as outlined above. Australian academic, Judy Atkinson, describes the Aboriginal practice of Dadirri in her book *Trauma Trails, Recreating Songlines* (2003). Dadirri is a combination of ‘inner deep listening and quiet still awareness’, which involves one ‘listening and hearing with more than the ears’ (ibid: 16). Dadirri is listening at its most profound level: listening with the heart (ibid: 19). This is coupled with ‘a reflective non-judgemental consideration of what is being seen and heard and, having learnt from the listening, a purposeful plan to act, with actions informed by learning, wisdom and the informed responsibility that comes with knowledge’ (ibid). Whilst Atkinson acknowledges that Dadirri is not a methodology in the Western sense, it challenges us to think about knowledge-production in new ways. Dadirri allows one to ‘gather information in quiet observation and deep listening, builds knowledge through awareness and contemplation or reflection, which informs action’ (ibid: 17). I would describe my practice in a similar way: I spend a lot of time sitting and working with images, text, gestures: moving,

²² See Becker et al (2006).

sounding, writing, before I get a clear sense of the direction of a performance. And even then I have to move slowly enough to catch the threads as they fall around me. I would describe this as a feminine practice, based on a receptive principle, waiting for the ‘thing’ to arrive in the Cixousian sense of *arrivance* (1998: 61).²³

Chapter 2: Birthing Subjectivity

Matter/Mater

For many women, it is during pregnancy that their awareness of their bodies becomes heightened.²⁴ The pregnant woman may experience a splitting or doubling of body and consciousness itself: no longer can she regard what is inside as ‘myself’ and what is outside as ‘separate’. Inner and outer are ‘continuous, not polar’ - each day as the foetus grows it is ‘becoming separate from [her] and of itself’ (Young 1999: 148). This reaches its most

²³ I use Cixous’ writing about *arrivance* in her essay ‘What is it o’clock? Or The Door (we never enter)’ (1998) as a structure for thinking about the aesthetics of waiting for the other in *caesura*, Pamphlet 1.

²⁴ Iris Marion Young presents Sally Gadow’s position, which explains this as an aesthetic experience of the body: we ‘become aware of ourselves as body and take an interest in its sensations and limitations for their own sake, experiencing them as a fullness rather than a lack’ (1999: 165).

extreme point at birth. It is this transition from pregnant subjectivity to maternal subjectivity that I would like to consider in order to begin to articulate an embodied birthing subjectivity. Specifically, I ask: how can we describe the gap she might experience in moving from one identity to another?

Iris Marion Young argues that not only does the pregnant woman experience her body connected to her child's, but her focus or awareness is also in two places at the same time.²⁵ She can attend to her daily life and retain a connection to the life in her womb, maybe performed through a gentle rubbing of her belly, or a resting hand there. As she goes about her daily life, she is constantly reminded of her materiality, her rootedness, her connection to the Earth. Her body has limits and she is often aware of these, but her bulk and weight can also 'produce a sense of power, solidity, and validity' (ibid: 166). For many women, being pregnant will not be the first time they will have become aware of this double-focus: from the time of their menarche at puberty, their bodies will have gone through a monthly cycle in which they change. They will have experienced changes in temperature, changes in bodily secretions, changes in hormones, and possibly strong cramping and discomfort during menstruation. Women learn how to continue their daily lives (the assumption being that their centre of focus is in the head), whilst being *with themselves*, aware of their belly, lower back, and even uterus (focus in the trunk). In a patriarchal society in which the reliable, constant and unchanging body is esteemed, women may come to experience a *dys-appearance* in relation to their bodies. Extending Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on phenomenology, Drew Leder explains: 'the body *appears* as thematic focus, but precisely as in a *dys* state – *dys* is from the Greek prefix signifying "bad," "hard," or "ill"' (Leder 1990: 84). *Dys-appearance* engenders awareness of one's body as dysfunctional. In his exposition of this term, Leder refers to menstruation, pregnancy and birth as times when a woman will experience *dys-appearance* from her body. Quick to point out that these natural functions of a woman's body should not be associated with badness or illness, Leder nonetheless only focuses on the discomfort and dysfunction of these experiences: he refers to Young's notion of split subjectivity, and proposes that during pregnancy a woman's body is 'doubled, away, asunder from itself' (ibid: 89). What alternatives do we have to this abject narrative?

²⁵ Young argues against American psychologist Erwin W. Straus' suggestion that the focus of everyday life is phenomenologically located in the head. Although he acknowledges that this focus can shift to the trunk in activities such as dance, he does not suggest it is possible for one's focus to be in both places at the same time (1999: 165).

Sociologist Imogen Tyler has written of the 'abject narrative' which persists in Western culture to describe the process of birth (Tyler 2009b and 2009c). Like Gablik who describes the paradigm shift occurring in art and Western culture more broadly, Tyler outlines the paradigmatic shift we are facing around birth, where we might move into another way of seeing and thinking: 'a movement from an abject aesthetics towards the creation of a "life-full" natal aesthetics that cannot be subsumed back within abject paradigms' (Tyler 2009b: 2). What aspects of the modern and late modern world view does the act of birth challenge? According to Julia Kristeva, the abject is what is radically excluded and is found in a place, an abyss, in which meaning collapses (Kristeva 1982: 2). In abjection, the body acknowledges that its 'boundaries and limits are the effects of desire not nature' (Grosz 1989: 74), and the ambiguity between inside and outside, dead and alive, autonomous and engulfing is necessary to retain the essence of abjection which is, by its very nature, impossible to assimilate (Kristeva 1982: 1). Thus, the abject is the subject's recognition of that which is impure and excluded, hovering on the edge of our existence, but which can never be obliterated (Grosz 1989: 71).

In her analysis of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, Elizabeth Grosz discusses three main types of abjection. The first is food loathing, which, for Kristeva, is linked to oral forms of sexuality. The reaction to this type of abjection is visceral and psychical, including retching, vomiting, choking. The body is seen to be 'in revolt' (ibid: 73). Kristeva explains the bodily revolt as: 'I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself' (Kristeva 1982: 3). The second type of abjection Grosz comments on is the repulsion of waste, including both bodily waste (spit, faeces, urine, blood, sperm), as well as the corpse itself (seen as the most horrific case of abjection) (Grosz 1989: 75). Our waste is thrown out so that we might live. Once out of the body, our waste signifies the other side of the border, that which we are not (Kristeva 1982: 3). This type of abjection is about transgression of borders and boundaries, in which the subject recoils at its own materiality through encountering what should be internal and a condition of bodily existence. Once this matter has been expelled out of the body, the body still identifies with it, it is still part of the subject, yet is regarded as filthy and unclean (Grosz 1989: 75). The third and final type of abjection highlighted by Grosz is disgust at the signs of sexual difference, which is connected to genital forms of sexuality. Whereas the corpse and waste challenge the ego from the outside, this type of abjection challenges the ego from within (ibid: 76). An example is our response to menstrual blood:

Menstrual blood...stands for the danger issuing within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (Kristeva 1982: 71)

During labour a woman may experience all three of these bodily transgressions: vomiting, defecating, and most of all her sexual difference will take centre-stage - with all of its *impurities* it may even risk *contaminating* the baby.²⁶ As the woman gives birth to her baby - as what is inside is brought outside - the grotesque is made real: a physical manifestation of doubling, as the baby's head emerges from her mother's vagina, for a time is both outside and inside, out-here and in-there - a distorted woman's body, baby's head conjoined via her genitals.²⁷ Women in general, and the birthing woman in particular, are viewed as a site of abjection: the excesses of their bodies and sexualities must be made taboo because their experience challenges the foundations on which the modern world view has been formed: that the self is completely contained and separate from the world/nature.

Judith Butler, however, in her articulation of subject-formation, suggests that it is *precisely* this experience of the abject-outside and its repudiation out of which the subject-inside emerges. In other words, as Paul Kottman puts it, for the subject to emerge, there must be a process of subjection to the abject which remains 'outside' as a 'threatening spectre', but which reveals itself to be necessary for 'the self-grounding presumptions of the subject' (Kottman 2000: xii). Therefore, it is through the physical act of labouring and giving birth that a woman may come into contact with the abject most closely, which is not to say that she becomes abjected by this however 'threatening' it may seem. Out of this experience with the abject-outside, the foreign, the strange, a new maternal subjectivity is born. According to Lisa Baraitser the maternal subject is formed in the post-natal period, which can be seen as 'a set of ethical relations with the post-birth child as radically Other, (...) an encounter with what is fundamentally strange, as well as being the same, that establishes this relationship as ethical, and hence as one in which we can begin to talk of the emergence of subjectivity' (Baraitser 2009: 46).

²⁶ In previous decades it was common practice in hospitals for the baby to be wiped and cleaned before the mother got to hold her.

²⁷ The original meaning of the word grotesque, from 16th century Italy, *grottesca* referred to paintings and work resembling those found in a grotto, a cave. Thus grotesque, used in this original sense, can describe the baby now emerging from her mother's cave, grotto, womb.

Maternal subjectivity as a concept for the ways that a mother might experience herself, her child and the world around her has been explored from radically different perspectives by women throughout the last 70 years. In her essay ‘Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond’ (2006), Emily Jeremiah gives an in-depth overview of the three ‘acts’ of thinking about maternal subjectivity. The first act can be typified, she says, by a ‘repudiation of motherhood and mothering’ informed by a clear rejection of essentialist views on gender seen as inherently oppressive for all women (Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone) (ibid: 22). The second act saw a phase of recuperation: ‘attempts to reclaim and revise maternity’ (Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Sara Ruddick, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva) (ibid). Of course, as Jeremiah points out, there are many differences between the thinking and writing of each of the women within each ‘act’. The third act of thinking, which we currently occupy, is ‘increasingly characterized by a sense of impasse’: women who (choose to) bear children are still living in a patriarchal socio-political machine, which is not designed to support them’ (ibid). As the gaps between what women need and what they are provided with erupt with more frequency, both in terms of specific maternity care and the general status of mothers in our society, the need to establish why her body matters grows more vital.²⁸

The issue is deeply rooted in a crumbling patriarchal worldview, which has put the role of men in reproduction above the role of women for 2,000 years. According to the dualist, masculinist, Aristotelian (and Christian) view of reproduction, spirit is set against matter. Spirit, aligned with the masculine and the notion of abstract, dis-embodied conception is elevated above childbirth, which is ‘materialized and feminized’ (Deutsch & Terrall 2012: 137).²⁹ Marina Warner illustrates the details of this model in *Alone of all her Sex* (1976), whereby the woman provides the matter, in the form of her menstrual blood, and the man provides the spirit, which quickens and forms the blood before evaporating. In Greek culture matter was seen as inferior to spirit, and therefore the role of the woman/mother was inferior to that of the man/father. In fact, as Warner points out, Aristotle went as far as to say that women were ‘a deformity, though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature’ (Warner 1976: 41).

²⁸ This can become an issue of defending basic human rights as the cases in which women are treated with indignity are revealed through the work of national charity Birthrights who work to promote women’s fundamental rights in pregnancy and birth: dignity, autonomy, privacy and equality.
<http://www.birthrights.org.uk/>

²⁹ This prevailing Aristotelian view of reproduction persisted until the nineteenth century when, with the invention of the microscope, for the first time the biology of reproduction could be observed.

More recently, Irigaray suggests in her essay 'The Way of Breath' (2003) that maternity is now often 'spiritually valorized as material gift, of body, of milk' but not as 'sharing of breath, sharing of life, sharing of soul' (ibid: 81). 'Spirit' of course is derived from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning breath. A woman not only shares her vital breath with the child, sustaining them while they are in the womb, but in fact she also shares her spiritual breath with them. Irigaray explains the former as the natural breath which keeps us tied to the mother, to woman, to the family, whereas the latter, the cultural breath, is closer to social or civil life, tied to the father and the masculine world (ibid: 75). A mother learns how to breathe not just for herself, but also in place of her child. Irigaray points out that it is only the mother who does this (ibid: 50). Most significantly, a woman must learn how to share her breath as opposed to giving it away. If she gives it all away, both she and her child would lose existence. This process of sharing breath continues throughout the life of the child, and once she has learned how to do this, a woman is able to share her breath with others too, afterwards. We could challenge this as an essentialist claim since it does not consider how women who have difficulties bonding with their unborn/birthed child might experience sharing breath: it is not necessarily a natural function of maternity.

In *Souffles* (1975), Cixous suggests that an openness to the other is a difference between the feminine and masculine genders.³⁰ The latter's way, she says, is 'to shield his flame, he invented hard forms for himself, volumes closed tight as fists' (quoted in Sellers 1996: 126), whereas the feminine is always moving towards the other: 'I in my need to always leave from me to you, streaming, risking the assault of an evil blast, I'm off, inventing extensions for myself, suppleness' (ibid). The feminine I, and in particular the maternal I, is grounded in softness, fluidity, gaseousness. Her ability to expand her breath in its widest sense and her constant relational attachment to the child (*I-to-you*) suggest a subjectivity that is in flux: it is never a fixed point. The *I-to-you* relation is foregrounded in the maternal, because the 'you' in this relationship is dependent on the I (for survival, comfort, love, etc.). The maternal carries some responsibility for the ways in which the other is formed and takes shape (physically, emotionally, etc.), which foregrounds the ethical dimension in this relation to the other. However the difficulty with Cixous' position is that it suggests the responsibility for love and connection for the child comes from the female-gendered mother, when it would be

³⁰ Discussed by Susan Sellers in *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (1996: 51-52).

more accurate to say this is a function served by the maternal, which does not necessarily mean mother.

Baraitser has described the condition of the maternal as ‘both singular and multiple simultaneously, while still being figured in the feminine’ (Baraitser 2009: 38). After Levine, Baraitser explains that we do not need to have biological ties to have filial relationships – one can ‘elect’ anyone else as a ‘child.’ As the move away from essentialism has taken place, so too has there been a shift from the word motherhood to ‘mothering’: the verb form emphasises mothering as an active practice regardless of gender identity (Jeremiah 2006: 21). Thus, the maternal and paternal are performative roles that one can assume in the same way that Butler has described gender when she states: ‘There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (Butler 1990: 25). In this way maternity is a practice, and maternal subjectivity is not static, but rather in process, constantly constructed or ‘performed’ (Jeremiah 2006: 24).

Breaking open. ||

Tearing me in the places that hold fast. ||

Wrenching me from all I thought I knew.

|| Didn’t know myself.

|| Couldn’t hear myself.

(from *On Burning // Fire*, Pamphlet 2: Rehearsals for a Birth Story)

And yet what of the mother’s ripped, torn, cut, aching, leaking body? What of the wild storms of hormones that blow through her post-partum body? What of the desperate heart cries she howls when she cannot hold her baby? Or the engulfing grief and anger that threatens to drown her? Or the sticky darkness that comes in her sleep that threatens to annihilate her? Without considering her experience of embodiment, her maternal identity becomes something she could switch on and off. Mothering may be a conscious act that she chooses to engage with to a greater or lesser degree, yet if the maternal subject is a role that she

assumes, then in what ways does it relate to the (unconscious, chaotic) bodily experiences that emerge from/through her? Baraitser uses the metaphor of borders to describe maternal subjectivity as ‘a fundamentally changed or transformed state, a state at or beyond the border that we once would have recognised as a self-boundary, and from which we may glimpse ourselves anew’ (Baraitser 2009: 44). I would argue that instead of thinking about birth as the point at which a woman moves beyond a more limited sense of self, her experience of transformation through giving birth produces a rupture in her subjectivity that can remain with her. Her pre-maternal self can remain present alongside her newly-formed maternal self, along with the space that has been generated by the rupture: the gap, the caesura. In her description of disruption in maternal subjectivity, Baraitser looks to David Appelbaum’s philosophy on the nature of experience and of the rupture itself to find a way to think about ‘the notion of an ethical subjectivity emerging out of an engagement with interruption as a *productive force*’ (Baraitser 2009: 76) (my italics). Appelbaum shows how:

The stop gives rise to a turn of awareness by which we pass from ignorance to [...] a somatic or sensory knowledge, a knowledge uncoupled from the intellect, and which brings forth consciousness (the I) and turns us towards conscience (ethical awareness of the other). (ibid)

Just as the way that a woman experiences (each) birth and her changing sense of self in a completely individual way, her response to interruption will also be unique. I wanted to navigate and direct that transition myself according to the maps I had drawn up as birth plans. I thought I needed to *do* something: to become the captain instead of being the boat. When my cervix would not dilate despite my intense willing it to do so, I began to experience birth as something that was thrust upon me. I no longer had control over what was happening and disconnected myself from my body. Put another way, ‘I’ felt subsumed by my body and my baby trying to make his way out of me. This retreat of will was not enough and I needed to move/was moved further away from my body to a state of unconsciousness: I was interrupted. For many years the space that had been created by this interruption was occupied by trauma. And in fact, it was the trauma that revealed itself through performance-making that made me aware that a gap existed within me. Once I healed myself, the trauma was cleared but the space remained. Instead of being an impenetrable barrier within me, it has become an open vista that I can move across and occupy when I choose. This deeply somatic experience is rich in feeling and sensation, which, as Appelbaum puts it, has required me to ‘lessen the weight of the intellect’ in order to ‘permit an equilibration with the weight of the

soma, hitherto unsensed' (Appelbaum, cited in *ibid*). Performance-making not only allows me to engage with my experience of embodiment, but as it contains a generative force it becomes a site for subjectivities to be made and unmade, to be written and re-written - a site of becoming.

Pamphlet 1: *caesura*

Please now read Pamphlet 1: *caesura*

Subjectivity and Language

Butler does not regard the ‘subject’ as the ‘individual’; instead, she considers it as a site which can be occupied by an individual, which produces intelligibility, so that the subject ‘is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency’ (Kottman 2000: xiii). As Kottman puts it, Butler argues that ‘the individual person acquires the only intelligibility he/she can have – a *linguistic* one – by becoming a subject’ (ibid). By contrast, Adriana Cavarero argues that the intelligibility of the individual, to whom she refers as the ‘unique existent’, is not ‘first established in language’, but rather he/she is a flesh and blood existent whose unique identity is revealed *ex post facto* through the words of his or her life story (ibid). In *Relating Narratives* (2000),

Cavarero uses the term ‘narratable self’ to describe the possibility for the unique existent to be narratable and not narrated. Unlike the subject, the narratable self ‘does not make of him/herself a third person, does not go from ‘I’ to ‘s/he’, but rather *desires this story, this story of birth, from the mouth of another*’ (Kottman 2000: xv). This other, then, becomes ‘the necessary other’ for Cavarero (Cavarero 2000: 81). In her exposition of the ‘necessary other’ Cavarero, following Arendt, suggests that the only way a writer can appear to herself is through the gaze of others (ibid: 80). Cavarero considers the way that Gertrude Stein sees/writes herself through the eyes of her lover Alice Toklas, when she writes an autobiography for Toklas (*The Autobiography of Alice Toklas*). The text, suggests Cavarero, functions as ‘a sort of theatre of the self,’ in which Alice becomes ‘the necessary other’ (ibid).

When I tell the birth stories of my sons, I too am using their stories as a way of telling my own. How does one avoid the ‘exhibitionist narcissism’ of which Stein (and Arendt) has been accused of? (ibid: 84). Cavarero describes the basis of the autobiographical genre as:

The strange pretense of a self that makes himself an other in order to be able to tell his own story; or, rather, of a self which, using his memory as a separated mirror in which he inseparably consists, appears to himself as an other – he externalizes his intimate self-reflection. The *other*, therefore, is here the fantasmic product of a doubling, the supplement of an absence, the parody of a relation. (ibid: 82)

As a feminist critique of this traditional approach to autobiography my performances challenge this structure by writing ‘my’ story of a time when I am doubled with an actual other in pregnancy. The birth story, the story of one’s beginning, is according to Cavarero ‘the essential chapter in which the self becomes narrated before even knowing herself to be narratable’ (ibid: 86). It gives rise to the narratable self, whose desire is always the ‘unity of self’ (ibid). By awaiting/narrating my sons’ beginnings, I narrate my beginning as mother in an(other) attempt to find unity, in which I hope I will find peace, forgiveness, or at least (some) truth. The birth story, then, is always a yearning for the maternal, which is to say, beyond the role-function of the maternal: to search for the maternal is to search for the ‘source of goods’, as Cixous puts it (1976: 881).

Birth Story Narratives

When it comes to telling the birth story of another, the other is constituted not only as a unique existent, but moreover each telling is also unique. Butler argues that the subject only acquires agency when one can enter into the linguistic life, which comes after the other has spoken for/to the subject (Kottman 2000: xix). Kottman outlines how Butler's description of the child-adult relationship metonymically figures 'the way in which "power acts on the subject...as what makes the subject possible...its formative occasion..."' (ibid). I would like to consider the inter-relationship between language, power and subject-formation in relation to the abject, in the context of the way that women tell their birth stories. According to Della Pollock, birth stories signify a contest for control over 'the meaning and value of giving birth of which they are, in turn, a vital part' (1999: 1). Birth stories, she says, all too often hover at the edge of conversation, are barely there, and yet 'all too much here' in the body of the woman who holds the story (ibid). Through her ethnographical research, Pollock asserts a number of key features of birth stories,³¹ which are common to a wider patriarchal narrative framework.

To begin with, most birth stories take a comic narrative structure, in which women are successful in rising out of the depths of terror and anger 'to embrace the emerging baby'. This success is often measured against the norms of what a healthy baby means. Regardless of their journey through the birth experience, women can resolve everything by giving thanks for their own health, and the health of the baby, which is often down to the necessary and life-giving interventions of the medical staff (ibid:4).³² Significantly, most (of these) birth stories follow a linear, progressive structure, which has been 'inculcated in prenatal classes and pregnancy handbooks' (ibid). This model begins with *planning to have* a baby, followed by *making* a baby, then pregnancy and *preparing for the arrival* of the baby, then *having* the baby, and ends with the *arrival* of baby. It is time-driven: it follows a clearly delineated 40-week structure, with expected or *due dates* for arrival. In order to increase their chances of what Pollock names a 'good outcome', women are advised to follow specific medical advice and guidance throughout this period (ibid). Physical emotional and mental welfare are encouraged through recommended dietary and exercise *regimes*, as well as emotional and

³¹ Pollock is dealing primarily with birth stories gathered in Chicago and Boston, and the south-east region of the US in the mid-nineties, but her analysis and theories remain true in the 2010's across most of the Western world.

³² In my own experience, I think this resolution enables a woman to become present to the needs of her new-born baby: it closes the story for her in a sense. However, it is only a temporary (re)olution, and in order to find deeper resolution for herself, she will need to return to the experience and re-tell it.

mind-calming tips. The spiritual aspect of a woman is generally not commented on by such medical guides.

Pollock comments on the ways that birth stories are outcome-driven. Because the act of giving birth is the goalpost in the medicalised birth plan, the woman's birth story is offered to fulfil other people's needs to hear the 'news'. "Any news?" they will ask. And what they want to know is: "is it a boy or a girl?" "Weight?" "All healthy?" Full stop. Pollock comments on the way a mother is given a few week's *license* to allow any difficulties or traumas to linger in the silences or pauses in her story, and after that, no one wants to hear about them. She must move on. If the woman has experienced a *failed-birth*, ending in a stillbirth, miscarriage, abortion, or any kind of deformity (regarded as a *bad outcome* in the medical narrative), there is an even greater resistance to listen to the woman's story. What is allowed is a 'cursory, obligatory, brief and uncomfortable break from the routine silence, a kind of toll paid to all the friends and family members waiting for the *news*' (ibid: 5).

Pollock highlights the leaky, porous, infectious nature of birth stories. She writes about how on hearing a gruesome birth story from a stranger at a supermarket while she herself was pregnant with her first child, the stranger's story became part of her body, her experience: it made her shudder at the limitations of her own body. The stranger's story created a rupture in Pollock's previous serenely crafted life/story. She found herself initiated into a secret society. She was being given information she didn't ask for, but which transformed her through a threshold experience. Through this information, her ideal birth scenario/story was cut off from the frail walls of her body, on which the story was tenuously perched (ibid: 3). In her previous essay 'Origins in Absence: Performing Birth Stories' Pollock suggested that the drama of the birth event (the suspension that is built through its impending imminence) is re-enacted when the story is told, often with 'dramatic urgency' (1997: 11-12). This urgency itself is re-enacted through repeated tellings of the story, and this transfers to tellers who are other-than-the-mother. It is as though each story carries a fragment of the spirit of the birth experience with it. It has a life of its own, outside of the control of the teller, which persists, without diminishment, in each telling.³³

Finally, Pollock proposes that birth stories are told by a community of women who have been 'gloriously uprooted, betrayed, profaned by one's own body' (ibid: 12). The stories have

³³ This is true of stories in which women have experienced trauma as well as empowerment and ecstasy, and can be seen through Pollock's analysis of her interviews throughout the book.

already been told through her embodied experience: each woman's body tells the unique story of her birth-event. Each birth story is completely original: they tell of the origins in performance, as well as having the power to establish origins. Due to their 'immediacy, contingency and particularity' Pollock warns, birth stories are dangerous. They resist and challenge preferences for 'more linear abstract modes of knowledge' (1999: 9). She even suggests that 'as minor myths of origin' birth stories 'loan history the authority of beginnings' (ibid). Their originality consists in 'centering history in the convergences of performativity and maternity' (ibid: 10). Birth stories make history subject to 'the maternal body performing itself in ritual' (ibid).

When women consciously or unconsciously align themselves with the medical system they often otherwise reject, they become complicitous by staying within the comic-heroic structure (ibid: 15). In an attempt to stay within orderliness, women may have to reposition themselves and their allegiances to the medical system. Although this allegiance may be resisted during the birth-event, it can be assumed afterwards in the telling of the birth experience. Thus the whole story, which may have been medically not-normal, becomes normalised because of the eventual allegiance to the medical wisdom; for example an unwanted caesarean section may, later, be thought of as a good thing (ibid). Ultimately, according to the medical narrative, it is to prevent a labouring woman's death or the death of her child that medical intervention becomes so 'necessary'. In the early 1980s Ann Oakley made this explicit in *The Captured Womb* (1984):

[...] both birth and death's normal signs have become neon lights flagging risks which demand and validate medical intervention. In the case of death, the heroic use of medical technologies interrupts a 'terminal' state. (Oakley 1984: 276)

Avoiding the common dialectic of natural versus medicalised birth, Oakley points out that the 'natural' way to be born or die 'is spurious because all ways of birth and death are cultural accretions' (ibid). There is an alignment in this relation but it is the *birthers/die-ers*, the people themselves, versus the medical technicians 'in their socially sterile hospital or clinic' who attempt to manage the life/death process (ibid). Women's negative experience of the medical environment and staff during labour has been explored within the field of midwifery.³⁴ The effect of this may result in the woman 'feeling invisible, feeling out of control, being treated inhumanely—not only during the birth but also in the longer term—and

³⁴ See Beck (2006), Christiaens et al (2011), Thomson & Downe (2010), Nilsson et al (2010) and (2012).

experiencing a feeling of being trapped' (Nilsson et al 2012). Whilst a woman performs agency by telling her own story, as long as the narratives are ordered by/within the patriarchal, medicalised structure, then the woman does not have any power: she is subjected to that story. In this model, the abject-outside includes the medicalised experience, which works to keep the inside-in, inside-clean, inside-controlled.³⁵

Chapter 3: Speaking and Listening to Birth Stories

The first time I began to re-write my own birth story was for a performance called *twenty minutes* in 2012. I was compelled to do this because I had been unconscious for the birth of my son, and therefore the story had a large gap, lacuna, caesura in it. At the time of the performance, I still felt a bit lost in this gap. I recovered what I could of the story from the events at the edges of what I could remember. Inspired by Forced Entertainment's *Exquisite Pain* (2005), I used repetition to reveal the pain, the trauma, and performed an obsessive attempt to try to reimagine some control over what had happened. I begin this chapter revisiting that performance to describe the nature of the caesura that revealed itself to me, in me, through the course of the creative process. This will involve an exploration of the

³⁵ There are recent examples where women, themselves, have begun to express their experiences in forms that begin to rehearse their unique existence and power for auto-narration. These include blogs, websites, online forums, newspaper articles, books. Referred to as 'momoirs' and 'mumslit' by Baraitser and Tyler (2010), these forms of writing invite an element of participation, especially in the online form. They move away from masculine approaches to writing from an 'experts' point of view, which 'gives' information rather than initiates dialogue. Kristeva refers to this as 'chatter' (Baraitser 2012: 7).

relationship between trauma and rupture, before considering the role of witnessing and deep listening to this rupture. Drawing on a range of psychoanalytic and philosophical texts, the chapter moves towards a consideration of the ways in which listening informs speaking and asks what role does listening play in constructing one's sense of 'self'? In the final section I investigate the womb as a resonant space, in which each of us has our first embodied experience of 'self', as we perceive the echo of the (m)other in us.

1 Listening interrupted

twenty minutes (2012) was a 24-hour performance in two sections. The first lasted 23 hours, and involved me building a 10m sand mandala and labyrinth through the night without sleeping. The second section lasted an hour. It involved a public audience who were invited in to the space to witness a pre-choreographed performance. The performance included a projected film (the reflection of which forms the first section of this chapter), a movement score and both a live and pre-recorded soundtrack. The performance had come out of my enquiry into the experience of giving birth by caesarean section under general anaesthetic. The findings from this initial enquiry became the foundation for this current research project.

A 55-minute auto-interview to camera. Rather than a linear prose testimony, based on historical detail and accuracy, the interview contains a repetition of what I can remember from the point at which I decided to have a caesarean section. The narrative moves from this point, at times jumping back to earlier phases of the labour, and stretched forward beyond the actual operation to the point at which I am lying in bed, with my son in his cot next to me. But always starting from the same point. I am following some rules that I have made: speak until I run out of things to say, then start again; speak only about my own experience, without involving others who were present more than is necessary; keep talking, no pauses. A single take of story-telling. *And then* dozens of viewings: watching, listening. I was surprised to discover how much silence and stillness there was in my speaking. Often this happened between 'episodes' of remembering, but silence was also found within remembered fragments. My body was so still that at times it looked like the film had been paused. Everything frozen on the outside. But whilst telling, I don't recall ever feeling this freeze: the inner life was still very active. Overwhelmed, one might say, if one was experienced in 'reading' performances of trauma.

pause

[break]

-rupture-

|caesura|

In my filmed auto-interview I perform some of the common trauma-indicators, namely the *freeze*,³⁶ doing the opposite of what psychoanalyst and trauma theorist Dori Laub recommends when he states that one must remove oneself sufficiently from the ‘contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness, that is, to be sufficiently detached from the inside so as to stay entirely outside of the trapping roles, and the consequent identities’ either of the subject or the perpetrator (Laub 1995: 66). Watching the film, I can see and hear myself. I can witness the *contaminating power* of the event as it plays out in my body. And I can hear it resonate in my body, now afterwards, as I watch the screen. For according to psychoanalysis, trauma carries a contagion: there is a danger for both the narrator and the listener in becoming ‘contaminated’ by the trauma (Caruth 1995: 10). When I watch my performed birth story, I am affected by the traumatic affect: a double affectation.

If performance engages with the possibilities of affect, then what are the ethics of communicating the traumatic? My response to this question was twofold. Firstly, by using the film within a live performance, I was offering the audience a physical anchor to connect to: my presence could act as a life buoy that they could hold on to, so as not to drown in the sea of the wound. Part of me was still submerged there. Secondly, the physical action would not

³⁶ Peter Levine describes the biological process of how humans/animals move into a state of fear-dominated paralysis, which causes whole body-mind immobilisation (2010: 39). This is the biological basis of trauma. See also Levine (1997).

be representative of my birth story: it would do something else, namely an attempt to come into the place of witness for my own story. Through an evocation of a number of the states I experienced during labour, I attempted to listen to my story in a new way, to hear, for the first time, the truth that the trauma was telling me (ibid: viii). I was telling and listening. And my listening was amplified by the people in the room who were also listening. Instead of being a passive audience, these people were sharing this experience with me. It could not have happened in the way it did with another group of people, or at any other time. Listening, like telling is ephemeral, and always in flux.

Listening and Witnessing

No-one can bear witness from the inside of death. There is no voice for the disappearance of voice. (Agamben 2002: 35)

If we are to listen to trauma ‘beyond its pathology for the truth that it tells us, and [...] find a way of learning to express this truth beyond the painful repetitions of traumatic suffering’ (Caruth 1995: viii), then we must be able to become witnesses of whatever event it was that caused the rupture. Giorgio Agamben suggests that testimony contains a lacuna (Agamben 2002: 33), an absence, which must be listened to (ibid: 13). Clearly writing in a completely different context from my area of research, Agamben’s description of the lacuna in the testimony of survivors of Auschwitz is based on the fact that the survivors, those who offer a story, are those that did not experience the gas chambers. Writing after Levi he says:

The “true” witnesses, the “complete witnesses,” are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who “touched bottom”: the Muslims, the drowned...the drowned have nothing to say...They have no “story.” (ibid: 34)

The survivors, according to Agamben, become pseudo-witnesses, speaking in their stead, by proxy, bearing witness to ‘a missing testimony’ (ibid).

Dori Laub considers the relationship between trauma and listening to the lacuna. Trauma, he maintains, carries the ‘impossibility of knowing out of the empirical event itself’ and ‘opens up and challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, of *impossibility*’ (Caruth 1995: 10). To testify no longer means to tell the ‘truth’, but, as Felman and Laub put it when they are describing Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*, to testify is to tell a story that is neither inside nor outside. Rather, the testimony (as the film in this case) takes up a position that is both inside and outside the event, creating a connection between the inside and the

outside ‘that did not exist during the war and does not exist today’, but one which sets them both ‘in motion and in dialogue with one another’ (Felman and Laub 1992: 232). Thus, when we are speaking of a traumatic event, we are connecting then to now through the ‘telling’. This act of connection is a kind of piecing together - sewing two parts together with words, images, body, so that each comes alive. This act of telling is not about telling the truth, but about bringing to life that which has come closest to death.

As I am telling my repeated birth story, there is a moment where I mention being in the operating theatre and my husband not being allowed to come in. At that point in the experience everything seemed more like a dream. After the performance, my husband was quick to let me know that he did come in and kiss me before they ‘knocked me out.’ I just didn’t remember it that way. Within hours of recovering consciousness after the birth of my son, I had already begun to form my story, to connect bits together, even if they didn’t actually happen in that way: so that my story was connected, was solid. So that, no matter how painful it was to think about it, or tell it, at least I could hold onto this narrative. And I rehearsed this narrative over and over again through the many times I told my birth story to others. Telling it made me feel powerful, in control of my wounded-ness, even self-righteous at times. I was a victim of a medical system which does not empower women in labour. And I felt stronger to be able to express my indignation of this through my story-telling.

I seal the cracks with my words
I am telling but not listening
I cannot hear what the wound has opened up in me
I run away from listening to it

When I watched myself telling my story on video, I could witness myself for the first time. I realised that whilst I had been speaking, I was not *hearing* my story. Jean-Luc Nancy differentiates three points in the listening/hearing continuum from hearing, as a sense, to listening, as an attention strategy, to hearing as understanding (*entendre/comprendre*): ‘in all saying...there is hearing, and in hearing itself, at the very bottom of it, a listening’ (Nancy 2007: 6). Hearing in the first order is involuntary and indiscriminate. Listening, on the other hand, is ‘to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible’ (ibid). Thus, to be listening is ‘always to be on the edge of meaning’ (ibid: 7). Meaning can be constructed based on what has been heard. When I spoke my story, I could not hear my own rhythm. The story-telling required most of my attention, animating

my body with an emotional force that there was nothing or ‘no-one’ left to hear (understand) within me. Thus, I was unable to hear any truth that Caruth outlines we need to try to grasp when we listen to traumatic narratives. But who is the one who listens to my listening? The one who listens to my telling? If this listener/witness has collapsed, then it is impossible to hear my own beat or even the beat of others. Yet each time I watched the interview, listening, as Nancy describes it ‘on the edge’ (ibid), the listener/witness grew stronger in me. So that when it came to the live performance I was able to write the following afterwards:

As I try to remain within my body, listening to, but separated from the other-me, I am aware of the two worlds we live in. I am aware that once, our worlds were much closer. It is only in seeing her in front of me, hearing her story over and over again, that I realise she is now just a small part of me. She wants to be heard, and when she speaks, I can see glimpses of the place in which she resides, where the silence is as present as the word, though she does not know this, for she cannot see outside herself.³⁷

What, then, is the relationship between the witness from trauma theory and Nancy’s listener? Etymologically, Agamben gives two possible meanings for the term witness: *terstes*- the third (neutral) party in a lawsuit, or *superstes*- someone who has lived through something and can therefore bear witness to it (Agamben 1999: 17). But in the case of bearing witness to a traumatic experience which someone has lived through, survived, the form that the *bearing* takes requires another witness to form an intersubjective contract with the teller (Felman & Laub 1992: 6). If the listener does not listen - does not, in this case, welcome the woman and her story- then she will only hear her story in an already familiar way. If on the other hand, the listener can invest what Hirsch and Spitzer call a ‘tremendous libidinal’ energy, allowing the testimony to move, haunt and endanger them, without appropriating or owning it, they have the capacity to help to restore her ‘humanity and identity’ - ‘the survivor knows [s]he is being heard’ and will be able to ‘stop to hear – and listen to – him[her]self’ (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009: 163). The listener is thus co-creating the story: the depth of his listening affects the way the story is told and heard (understood) by the teller.

To draw some parallels with Nancy’s exposition on listening, we could firstly say that to act as a witness requires the listener to sit on the edge of meaning; to resist the attempt to construct meaning from the story they are being told. It also requires the listener to attempt to avoid looking for a subject, which serves to help one to identify itself with and through

³⁷ Taken from my performance notes on *twenty minutes* (2012).

another self. The witness becomes the echo of the speaker, through which it becomes possible to make sense.³⁸ When one truly *listens*, one ‘tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message’ of what one is listening to (Nancy 2007: 5). One may become ‘all ears’, which Nancy rephrases as to be immersed entirely in listening (ibid: 4). In my filmed auto-interview, the camera acted as a witness for me, with the film becoming an imprint of all that has been seen and heard. Unable to offer the inter-subjective relationship that is possible with another human being, it was more like a virtual wall that echoed the sound of myself back to me. This enabled me to listen to myself at first, and then later, to hear and make meaning from my experience more fully. This process of the emerging witness grew stronger each time I worked with the footage. Thus, filmed testimony, which incorporates a poetic dimension (the use of repetition and pauses), can offer a source of knowing for the narrator herself.³⁹

2 Hearing/Listening/Hearing my Birth story

I learned how to listen to my own birth story ‘by accident.’ It wasn’t something I had set out to do in my initial enquiry. However, through the lens of *this* research project, I have the opportunity to use it as a source of performance material that I can expand upon. Following on from my initial analysis of my auto-interview through trauma theory, I have drawn some parallels between the witness and Nancy’s listener. In this following section, I will move into further detail on the process of listening as outlined by Nancy, Le Guin, Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe. This will begin with an exploration of the relationship between telling/speaking and listening, before moving on to investigate the resonances between listening, self, and subjectivity. Finally, I will offer a short contextualisation of my autobiographical practice within the wider Feminist practice, in which the process of re-writing dominant narratives in an attempt to construct the/a self has been a theme since its inception 50 years ago.⁴⁰

³⁸ Nancy’s description is: ‘When one is listening, one is on the lookout for a subject, something (itself) that identifies *itself* by resonating from self to self, in itself and for itself, hence outside of itself, at once the same as and other than itself, one in the echo of the other, and this echo is like the very sound of its sense’ (2007: 9).

³⁹ The acknowledgement of the boundaries of the two worlds is imperative, and is helped by the framing of the screen and the switch of a button. The risk of becoming lost, contaminated, with further fragmentation is possible. But the separation must be recognised before it can be integrated.

⁴⁰ See Heddon (2007)

To speak my birth story means I will speak and listen simultaneously. For French poet Francis Ponge ‘speaking is already its own listening’ (Nancy 2007: 35). Ponge proposes:

Not only any poem at all, but any text at all- whatever it is- carries (in the full sense of the word), carries, I say, its speaking. For my part if I examine myself writing – I never come to write the slightest phrase without my writing being accompanied by a mental speaking and listening, and even, rather, without it being preceded by those things (although indeed just barely). (cited in Nancy *ibid*: 35)

To sound, Nancy writes, ‘is not only, for the sonorous body, to emit a sound, but it is also to stretch out, to carry itself and be resolved into vibrations that both return to itself and place it outside itself’ (*ibid*: 8). To which he adds, ‘animal sonorous emission is necessarily also [...] its own reception’ (*ibid*: 15). In her essay ‘Telling is Listening’ (2004), Ursula K. Le Guin outlines the biological detail of the complex processes that take place between two people who are speaking and listening to each other. According to Le Guin, neither telling nor listening is a one-way process: they are mutual, intersubjective, relational and occur simultaneously. The depth of communication rests, she argues, on the level of attunement and entrainment between the pair (or group), but, she points out, hearing/understanding what someone else is saying requires the listener to be able to hear their own rhythm first (Le Guin 2004: 194-197). For Le Guin, each human being has their own rhythm, or ‘beat,’ which comes as a result of their attempt to co-ordinate the millions of different ‘oscillation frequencies’ or pulses of their many biological systems. Ideally one achieves this ‘by getting the beats into a master rhythm’ (*ibid*: 195), a process which she calls entrainment. She defines this as:

Any two things that oscillate at about the same interval, if they’re physically near each other, will gradually tend to lock in and pulse exactly at the same interval. Things are lazy. It takes less energy to pulse cooperatively than to pulse in opposition. Physicists call this beautiful, economical laziness mutual phase locking, or entrainment. (*ibid*)

To a large extent, the process of entrainment is outside of our conscious control: it is an involuntary biological function that takes place with minimal effort for most people. Attunement, on the other hand, requires the conscious placing of attention on the object one wishes to tune in to. Tuning in is the process through which I register and adjust my own frequency of attention, so that I may pick up or receive a signal that is being transmitted. Tuning in allows me to foreground my body, and my bodily sensations, in a way that is simply not possible at all times in daily life. Being attuned is a state, in which my body is both a transmitter and a receiver. Nancy reminds us that the term ‘to be tuned in, to be

listening' (*être à l'écoute*) was initially used in the field of military espionage, before returning to public usage via broadcasting (Nancy 2007: 4). Attunement begins, according to Derrida, with a welcome 'where the thinker welcomes the fact that an/other may come' (Derrida in Crawford 2013: 78). Crawford goes further to explain that

the action of the welcome is to be passive by allowing the other to come. In this passive activity I direct my attention toward an/other without necessarily trying to find the other [...] because if I am not open to the other, available to be encountered by the other, then the other has no way to encounter me. (ibid)

Thus, the other can be encountered across the gap that exists between two people.

We are becoming attuned to each other,
You and I,
Sitting here together,
Doing nothing.

This could be our encounter.

For that to happen we must both be open to each other.
Which means not being afraid.
Which means softening our edges.
Which means letting go.

We can start (if you'd like)
by listening to each other -
That is something we know how to do
(Maybe).

To listen is to open.
I open myself -
Create space in myself,
So that I can hear you better.

I find space in the back of my neck, the centre of my breastbone
Space between the ribs, the point
Where chest meets trunk.

There is space here in my belly
Rounded and soft,
The arched space in my lower back
Welcomes the sound of you.

And inside - in the womb-space

There is a darkness that is open to you.

The backs of my knees,
The gap behind my ankle bones,
Toes stretching out create more space.

You are welcome.

I have grown a thousand ears
To hear you better.

Not searching ears -
They don't want to possess you
But they are curious,
So very curious.

They will come close to you, if you let them
Listening quietly to your rhythm
Noticing how it is different to mine
Excited about what this means...

Listening / Self / Subjectivity

Who is the one who listens? And who is the one who listens to my listening? What 'self' is responsible for these (witnessing) functions within me? What role does listening play in constructing a 'self' and subjectivity? And, how can these 'selves' be constructed and performed? To return to Nancy:

A self is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a self is made up of a relationship to self, or of a presence to self, which is nothing other than the mutual referral between a perceptible individuation and an intelligible identity. (2007: 8)

Nancy's 'self' is not a subjective position, and can be experienced by listening or 'passing over to the register of presence to self, it being understood that the "self" is precisely nothing available [...] to which one can be "present," but precisely the resonance of a return'. Thus, listening does not become a 'metaphor for access to self,' but 'the reality of the access to self' (ibid: 12). Furthermore, a subject is made in this process of referral, in the spacing and resonance, the repetition and echo that is made by making itself heard. Because he can hear (himself), think and represent himself, he 'feels himself feeling a "self" that escapes or hides

as long as it resounds elsewhere as it does in itself, in a world and in the other' (ibid: 9). If the subject is made possible through temporality, then Nancy attests this is because

it defines the subject as what separates *itself*, not only from the other or from the pure "there," but also from the self: insofar as it waits for *itself* and retains *itself*, insofar as it desires (itself) and forgets (itself), insofar as it retains, by repeating it, its own empty unity and its projected or [...] ejected unicity. (ibid: 17)

Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe also suggests that it is the rhythmic 'signature' of our beings that is 'the condition of possibility for the subject': we are 'rhythmed' beings, 'constituted' by a rhythm of repercussion, resonance, echo, and reverberation, brought about by repetition, spacing and caesura (1989: 31). Every sound that we make contains rhythm and timbre. The 'rhythmic condition' makes it resound, and timbre is the 'resonance of the sound' (Nancy 2007: 40). What, then, creates rhythm for the subject to be made possible? Rhythm is inextricably linked to time, or 'the vibration of time itself in the stroke of a present that presents it by separating it from itself.' As it 'bends time to give time to itself' it thus 'folds and unfolds a "self"' (ibid: 17). Time falls back on itself and Derrida suggests that it is the caesura, the inner breaking that ultimately creates rhythm. In his introduction to Lacoue-Labarthe's book *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy and Politics* (1989), Derrida suggests that where this is the case, we are 'de-constituted by the marks of the "caesuraed" stamp,' a rhythmo-typy which is 'nothing other than the divided idiom in us of désistance' (1989: 31).

Operating between two languages (French and English), désistance (a word that does not yet exist) involves a temporal interruption – to cease, to stop. It is the ineluctable. Ineluctable is a double negative, as is the unavoidable (ibid: 3). Désistance refers to 'the withdrawal of the subject before the ineluctable, something that "has to happen"' (Martis 2005: 43).

Ineluctability 'is pre-impression, and this marks the désistance of the subject' (Derrida 1989: 2). But, rather than being taken in the passive or active sense of a subject being withdrawn, or withdrawing itself, Derrida recommends it is 'better for marking the middle voice' (ibid: 3), so that désistance 'puts off (from itself) any constitution and any essence' (ibid: 2). Thus we are constituted and de-constituted, folded and unfolded by rhythm and its caesurae. The caesura is, itself, arrhythmic. If we were to try and listen to it, we would find no beat. Only silence. Composer and musician Pauline Oliveros says this silence comes before and after all sound. She describes the relationship between sound and silence as symbiotic:

Time relationships may be instantaneous to very long. Listening to sound means listening to silences, and vice versa. There is no absolute silence unless there is zero

vibration. Silence means that we can hear no sounds. Silence is the space between sounds. (Oliveros 2005: 14)

Ultimately 'sound/silence is continual' (ibid: 16). When we withdraw from language, from sound, we enter silence: a pause, a gap that can be listened to...

...I try to hear you,
but there is always a distance,
Gaps and echoes,
Memories, terrors, pain,
Old wounds, ghosts that wander hungrily,
Distortions and mirrors.

In fleeting moments, I feel you coming close,
And I whisper 'welcome' –
'please do come closer' –
Before the reflection of yourself dazzles you
And you drift off again.

We know of difference from the very beginning.
That other heart,
that other rhythmized Being
is always there.
Babe in the womb, conceived in rhythm,
Gestates to the beating of two hearts.

This attempt to hear you through the distance between us -
An ache to return to that place
Where separation did not yet exist
And everything was unified.

The foetus listening to his thinking mother who
Continues to tumble, dive, collapse into this gap.
He hears her inner breaking.⁴¹

She withdraws into something other
That is not him.
That is unknown to him.

He listens, waiting for the thought to come again,
This time changed, altered, less sure of itself,

⁴¹ Crawford describes this as 'the gap brought forth through various caesurae also points to the inner breaking of each person who is thinking' (Crawford 2013: 31).

Aware of its own vulnerability
Aware that in order to exist
It must be ready to collapse at every moment.

Performing oneself

Keeping the tension between sound and silence, time and self, let us consider how one performs oneself in autobiographical performance. Or, what/who is being performed?

During the time of making and performing *twenty minutes* I experienced a multiplicity of selves, and from these encounters my overall sense of self was altered. Dee Heddon argues that the presence of shifting personae and indeterminacy in contemporary feminist autobiographical performance, and the ‘playing of multiple selves is a political act that resists the authority to the “I”, since this I is unknowable. It is also an act that refuses to let the “I” be fixed by the spectator’ (Heddon 2007: 40). The performer comes to know her/a self through a process of speaking from/to this position, using different voices, and then hearing her/self. Thus, the birth story I construct(ed) and choose to tell is part of the construction of an identity for myself. When a woman tells her birth story, giving voice to her own experience, not limited by any culturally-expected narrative constraints, she is embarking on a process of resistance, which is inherently political. Thus, she is affecting her own sense of identity as well as revealing and potentially disrupting the wider cultural discourses ‘that work to forge subjects’ (ibid: 39). In order to perform herself, she must construct herself. As Heddon puts it:

The performance of autobiography enables the construction of self, through both the production of narratives that constitute the self and through the staging of the self. Autobiographical performance brings to the fore the ‘self’ as a performed role, rather than an essentialised or naturalised identity. (ibid: 39)

Integrating Butler’s notion of the subject as a site together with Cavarero’s notion of the subject as unique existent, her body becomes the site in/on which she constructs herself. Her stories, her composition, and her voice all bear her uniqueness. As she speaks and listens to her echoes and resonances; as she tells and hears her gestures and words; as she enters and withdraws from herself, she is constituted and de-constituted, folded and un-folded in her own rhythms. She encounters herself in the gaps in her selves. She is made and unmade - her breath open to her becoming.

The open mouth,
Ready to give or receive.
When the luck is in, it's to let you speak.
When you listen, it takes your breath away.⁴²

3 Depth Listening

What does it mean for a being to be immersed entirely in listening, formed by listening or in listening, listening with all his being? (Nancy 2007:4)

The ears are the first sensory organ to be fully developed by the foetus in the womb: at seven weeks, and still just an embryo, the inner ear begins to develop; at eleven weeks the ear canal is formed; and by fifteen weeks the outer ear has formed and the foetus can begin to hear sounds. How does the womb then, as a resonant internal space, enhance this perceptual development? In what ways can a mother listen to the baby in her womb and how might this listening alter her sense of self/selves? What is the relationship between embodied experience and self?

Resonant Womb

The womb [*matrice*]-like constitution of resonance, and the resonant constitution of the womb: What is the belly of a pregnant woman, if not the space or the antrum where a new instrument comes to resound, a new *organon*, which comes to fold in on itself, then to move, receiving from outside only sounds, which when the day comes, it will begin to echo through its cry? (ibid: 37)

Resonance comes from the Latin *resonantia*, to echo. The verb *resonare* means to resound, from the root *sonare*, to sound, with the prefix re-, to exert effort. Thus resonance is always referring to another sound, another source. In the womb, the foetus becomes an echo of her mother, which means that the woman is able to engage in a process of subjectivity. She is a subject, separate, yet connected to this other life growing inside her. She may become aware of the different rhythm of the baby that grows in her womb. The gap between both of their

⁴² From Derrida, who says 'The caesura sometimes takes your breath away. When luck is with it, it's to let you speak' (Derrida 1989: 42).

rhythms, the caesura, allows her to enter into a spatiality that is akin to the spatiality one enters when one listens:

To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a “self” can take place. (ibid: 14)

The womb, like the belly, is a ‘sonorous cave’ that we can enter (ibid: 37). Nancy draws a parallel with the way a drum is made: animal skin pulled tautly over a hollow chamber and the body. The body, too, is a resonance chamber ‘from which the opening of a mouth can resume and revive resonance’ (ibid: 43). Each empty space in the body has the capacity to become a resonator for sound.⁴³ When we listen from these spaces, we become them: ‘it is always in the belly that we – man or woman – end up listening or start listening. The ear opens onto the sonorous cave that we then become.’ (ibid: 37). As sounds from the outside penetrate inside, and vice versa, the sonorized body

undertakes a simultaneous listening to a “self” and to a “world” that are both in resonance. It becomes distressed (tightens) and rejoices (dilates). It listens to itself becoming distressed and rejoicing, it enjoys and is distressed at this very listening where the distant resounds in the closest.’ (ibid: 43)

The womb, more than the belly, is a complete resonance chamber with its own physical opening, the cervix, thus it can sound itself. In childbirth, when the opening expands, the outside and the inside are no longer separate. The sudden expansion of another echo chamber is brought forth with the child’s first cry. Through his sound-making and simultaneous sound-hearing, the baby is born as ‘some *one* new and unique. Someone who comes to himself by hearing *himself* cry’ (ibid: 18). Thus it is in the noise of our sharing, with ourselves and with others, that we resound, and that we come to a sense of “self” (ibid: 41).

43 This is something which has been investigated thoroughly by theatre performers such as Jerzy Grotowski in his training exercises for actors as outlined in *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1975) and Eugenio Barba’s process of psycho-vocal techniques as described by Ian Watson in *Towards a Third Theatre: Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret* (2005).

Pamphlet 2: Rehearsals for a Birth Story

Please now read Pamphlet 2: *Rehearsals for a Birth Story*

Listening in/to the cave

In *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (2008), Michel Serres identifies three types of the audible: a primary source of noise within the body; the noise from/of the world; and finally the noises from the collective, which he suggests silence the body and the world (Serres 2008: 106-7). Moving from a (particular) woman's sense of the audible world connected to her sense of the noise of her own body (and the awareness of the noise of the body in her body), I would like to trace the listening-journey from pregnancy to birth to consider the ways that an engagement with the 'noise of her own body' informs her (changing) sense of self.

Irigaray's re-imagining of Plato's cave focuses primarily on visual perception: the gaze, light, shadow, the mirror, the speculum, fire, sun (1985). She proposes the idea of the 'womb-theatre,' whose 'illusionistic apparatus is, as in conventional mimetic theatre,⁴⁴ designed to obscure the mode of production' (Diamond 1997: xi). Philosophic man, who previously sought to forget his female origins, now 'discovers that, horrifically, mother is a theatre'

⁴⁴ The word theatre of course comes from the Greek word *theatron*, meaning 'viewing place'.

(ibid). The gaze in Feminist theory is attributed to a masculinist paradigm (Irigaray 1985; Mulvey 1975). Indeed, it is the visual connection with the foetus which has been prioritised over touch (and sound) in modern medical obstetrics (Furse 2006b: 3). The invisible has been made visible through imaging and ultrasound technology. Long before pioneer medical photographer Lennart Nilsson revealed the intricate details of the process from conception through pregnancy in *A Child is Born* (1966), medical staff used X-rays to diagnose foetuses. When it became clear that the radiation was harming the foetuses, the advancement of the ultrasound sped up (Furse 2006b: 6). By transmitting millions of high frequency sound pulses into the body, the ultrasound machine picks up on the echoes which return and converts these into a moving image (ibid: 8). Even with this sonic-generated image, the visual perception of the foetus is very limited. We don't see 'all of it'. Furthermore, as Alice Adams suggests, 'technologies of foetal visualization [...] affect how we think about the relationship between mothers and foetuses', to which she adds when reflecting on her own experience of this technology, '[i]t still disturbs me to realize that my reconception of myself as a mother was mediated at its deepest level by obstetric technology' (Adams 1993: 270).

Merleau-Ponty suggests that in order to perceive something which we cannot fully see we must 'delve into the thickness of the world by perceptual experience' (2002: 237), so that when we look at an object, we inhabit it and 'from this habitation [...] grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it' (ibid: 79). This process demands that we constitute things from the inside, so that 'the thing, and the world, are given to me along with the parts of my body, not by any "natural geometry," but in a living connection comparable, or rather identical, with that existing between the parts of my body itself' (ibid: 237). Thus, we engage in a process in which our sense of the external is mirrored internally: 'external perception and the perception of one's own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act' (ibid). In this model, sensation becomes the unit of experience. What we see, hear, touch on the outside registers as sensation inside.

After Derrida, it is clear that this inhabitation is never complete: there is always a gap, a caesura between the person and the thing. This is more complex when the relationship is between two people, who are both seeking to move towards the other. Furthermore, as each inhabitant/seeker is a 'unique existent' their experience of the other will also be unique: no two people experience the same thing in the same way. This supports Merleau-Ponty's proposition that the 'body-subject' is phenomenological because we actually experience and

live it (Abram 1997: 47). He identifies the subject, or the experiencing 'self' with the bodily organism, as David Abram summarises:

If this body is my very presence in the world, if it is the body that alone enables me to enter into relations with other presences, if without these eyes, this voice or these hands I would be unable to see, to taste, and to touch things, or to be touched by them - if without this body, in other words, there would be no possibility of experience - then the body itself is the true subject of experience. (ibid: 45)

Thus, it is the human animal which gives rise to the subjective experience. Abram extends this to describe 'becoming animal' as the process which we engage in (as a body-subject) when we open to the full continuum of the sensuous and sentient world. Through this process we 'become' this world. By 'tuning our animal senses' to the world around us and 'feeling the polyrhythmic pulse of this place' we become earth; become animal; become 'fully human' (Abram 2011: 3). This is closely aligned with the ecological body described in Chapter 2.

To complete this chapter, let us return to Nancy. In an overview of Husserl and Heidegger's work on listening, read through Granel, Nancy insists that the subject who listens, or the subject of listening, is not a phenomenological subject, nor a philosophical subject, and even that perhaps '(s)he is no subject at all' (Nancy 2007: 22). Instead, like Butler's subject-as-site, Nancy's subject is 'the *place* of resonance, of its infinite tension and rebound, the amplitude of sonorous deployment and the slightness of its simultaneous redeployment' (ibid) (my italics). As outlined in detail in this chapter, Nancy separates the subject from the self, suggesting the former is not an *experiencing* subject and the latter is not a *subjective* self, yet both are made possible through sound and resonance. On the one hand, this deconstruction protects us from the risk of essentialism, yet on the other, it brings us no closer to considering how the embodied experience of being human informs the ways we build our identity in relation to others and the given world. Phenomenologists Merleau-Ponty and Abrams suggest that by tuning our (animal) senses to the world around us and feeling the pulse of this place, by delving into the thickness of the world, the body becomes the true subject of experience. It is this sense of the experiencing body-subject that I would like to take forward to consider within my performance practice. However, I also want to carry forward the rich descriptions of the relationship between listening, sound and self that Nancy provides. Through my practice and exposition in the next chapter, I hope to arrive at a more complete articulation of an embodied birthing subjectivity.

So come now -
As you are.
Interrupt and disturb me
Break everything open
So that there is no possibility of closure.

I will wait for you here,
Ready to embrace you when you come.

Breaking, Silence

i
I heard the crack in your voice
when you arrived at 4am
in the snow, which, you
never told me,
had covered the roads in.

No second midwife, you said,
call the paramedics
for back-up.

I put a rug over the crack and
carried on labouring.

ii
The echo of your doubt, your anxiety,
pinged in my heart. The slow, heavy
beat of your fear drummed
inside my head. I wanted to wash it
away so I ran a bath, but couldn't
get my leg over the side with the
grip of contractions.

iii

Everything was contracting –
my womb, my hope,
my heart, my field of vision –
the clicking sound of a wrench
tightening on a screw –
squeezing, tensing, forcing –
I cannot open or release
myself. A taut spring in a
high-pitched squeal dissuades
the ear from listening. But
bones listen. The squeal
echoes through my skeleton
until my whole body is shaking –
pulsing in time with the tension.
There is nowhere to go.
There is nowhere to hide
from myself.

iv

Electricity hums at 50 cycles per minute in Europe,
and our chests resonate at the same frequency here too.
The more current that surrounds you,
the louder the air around you hums.
Sometimes we don't hear ourselves with the din.
We lose the silence.

That's why I turned the lights off.
That's why we lit a fire.

That way I could hear the purring and roaring of my body
and your body as we rocked and swayed and thrashed about.
No interference from Toshiba or Siemens.
No interruptions from Sony.
In the breaks, we sounded in whispers and grunts,
but mostly, we lost ourselves to the world we shared with them.
We abandoned boundaries and cages. Stripped away clothes and
language. Nothing could hold us back. We were being propelled out
of ourselves,
towards each other, whilst
tearing ourselves apart.

Later,
In the hospital,
there wasn't a wall that didn't have a plug

socket with 2, 3, 4, 5 machines plugged in.
All whirring and ticking and moaning louder
than my own groans. I tried dancing to this
new beat – flinging my arms, legs, my
undulating belly around the room,
but they didn't like it. They were already deaf
to their own bodies. The machine-beat had
muted their heart-beat, and they walked in
and out of my room without hearing me.

We need you to lie down. Lie down? Lie down?
But I'm dancing, I'm dancing, I can't possibly lie down!
We need you to be still. Be still? Be still?
But I'm erupting, I'm erupting, I can't possibly be still!

Ten minutes, she asked.
Just ten minutes,
 ten minutes. Long
enough to break my rhythm. Long enough to
break
me.

No need to speak to me. Now.
No need to listen to me. Now.
No need to look at me. Now.

Body-in-machine.
 The air is
tinged with metal filings that
rub against my ear drums. The
silent scratching dulls out the
scream of my marrow.

Chapter 4: Breaking Silence: Making Performance

Having considered in depth the relationship between speaking and listening in the ways that subjectivity is formed and constructed in the previous chapter, I will now proceed to explore the ways in which each of the three performances in this study told part of a birth story.

Whereas Chapter 3 was about falling out of language and into silence - hearing those ruptures, those pauses, caesurae - this chapter is about the journey out of silence and back into language and stories. I will focus on an analysis of narrative and metaphor in *caesura* (2013); sound and rhythm in *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015); and collaboration and presence in *AfterBirth* (2016). Taken together, this chapter begins to address the research questions more directly, which I reiterate here as a reminder:

1. How do the ways in which a woman tells her birth story through performance construct her subjectivity? To what extent does this re-perform a birthing subjectivity, and how does it relate to concepts of pregnant and maternal subjectivities?
2. What is the relationship between speaking and listening when a woman tells her birth story in performance? What effect does a ruptured birth narrative have on her maternal subjectivity?

3. When a woman becomes a mother how does her sense-of-self-as-mother relate to other aspects of herself, and how might she tell this story of becoming in/through performance?

Each performance was photographed and/or filmed and edited accordingly. I will indicate in the text the point at which I would like you to watch the AV documentation.

1 *Caesura* (2013)

There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor. (Cixous 1976: 881)

caesura (2013) investigates the impact of the rupture of a traumatic birth experience. In an attempt to move away from the dominant narrative of the woman-as-traumatised by an event outside of her control in which she becomes the victim, this performance subverts commonly used metaphors to describe the birthing woman, and thus changes the narrative and re-writes her experience. This act of agency allows her to reclaim herself more fully. This essay explores the ways that our use of metaphors to describe ourselves and other people informs our sense of subjectivity. Focusing primarily on the metaphors of the hero and the labyrinth, I am attempting to find a feminist, subversive articulation of the traditional understanding of these metaphors, which centres around the birthing/ maternal body, and her relationship to time and waiting for an-other.

Please watch the AV documentation of *Caesura* (2013) before reading the following text.

Narrative and Metaphor

The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack. And we believed. They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it's still going on. (Cixous 1976: 885)

The metaphors, or metaphorical concepts we use to tell our birth stories matter. In their seminal text *The Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson distinguish between metaphors and metaphorical concepts which we use in everyday language. Metaphors are

linguistic concepts that have an aesthetic function, whereas metaphorical concepts shape our understanding of abstract ideas. They write:

Because so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (the emotions, ideas, time, etc.), we need to get a grasp on them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms (spatial orientations, objects etc.). (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 115)

They classify metaphorical concepts into three main types: structural, orientational, and ontological. A structural metaphor, which is what I am concerned with in this essay, suggests that one thing is another: X is Y. Our understanding of what X is, is dependent on our knowledge of Y: ‘the essence of a metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another’ (ibid: 5). In order to ‘comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally,’ we use metaphors, which draw on both the objective (rational) and subjective (imagination) faculties: or an ‘imaginative rationality’ (ibid: 193). Lakoff and Johnson stress that metaphorical concepts are culturally specific.⁴⁵

In her essay ‘Language and the Transformation of Consciousness’ (1986), Feminist linguist Julia Penelope explores the ways in which the dominant Masculist⁴⁶ use of metaphorical concepts serve to subordinate women. She explores the ways in which combative and conflict-based metaphors such as *war* are used throughout our language. Her primary example is ‘ARGUMENT is WAR.’ This metaphorical concept is embedded into the patriarchal, Western culture, so much so that we use war-associated language to describe an argument:

Her claims are **indefensible**.
She **attacked** every weak point in my argument.
Your criticisms are right **on target**.
I **demolished** her arguments.
I’ve never **won** an argument with her. (Penelope 1986: 385)

Susan Sontag, in her reflection on the metaphorical concepts of illness in our society, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its metaphors*, also comments on the ways in which war metaphors are used to talk about illness: the **casualties** of AIDS, we **fight** cancer. She suggests that the consequences of this is that ‘it overmobilizes, it overdescribes, and it powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and the stigmatizing of the ill’ (Sontag 1991:

⁴⁵ They use the example of ‘time is money’ as a Western metaphorical concept.

⁴⁶ Penelope uses *masculist* rather than *masculinist*, as the antonym of *feminist*, as it refers to ‘the cultural, rather than biological, differences between the sexes that rationalize the subordination of wemyn’ (Penelope 1986: 382). Thus, both men and women can be considered masculist if they support the patriarchal culture.

94). In the same way, when we use war metaphors for women who give birth, we are likening them to the military, who **plan a strategy** (the birth plan), **prepare** for the event (pack hospital bags, get the nursery ready), and possibly even **train** for the event (breathwork, learning new physical postures that might help with delivery). Planning a birth with military precision cannot prepare you for birth, or becoming a parent to a small baby. Babies do not fit into such tight plans and structures.

There is one final point to consider, which Penelope points out: that when we use a structural metaphor such as ‘John is a Gorilla’, we establish an ‘identity relation between John and what our society’s *stereotyped idea* of what gorillas are “like”’ (Penelope 1986: 385). When we apply this to metaphors associated with birthing, we begin to see how they might be problematic. For example, ‘The woman who gives birth is a Hero’. Our cultural stereotype of the Hero in the West is the ‘**action** man,’ the ‘soldier,’ the one who goes off to **battle** and returns **victorious**,’ ‘the man who **protects** his family from danger,’ ‘the one who **rescues** someone else.’ So whatever metaphorical concepts we use to try to help women understand what birth is ‘like’, we need to be fully conscious of their contemporary resonances within the culture.

Birthing Metaphors

In 2013, I attended a midwifery conference in University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) to present a workshop that considered some of the masculinist language used within obstetrics, which I called ‘There’s a Stork in the Labyrinth’. I took examples of phrases used in the biomedical field from an article written by Lauren Hunter for the Journal of Midwifery and Women’s Health entitled ‘Women give birth and pizzas are delivered’ (2006). The midwives present were familiar with many of these phrases from their training and practice:

The mechanism of labour

Arrested labour

Failure to progress

False contractions

Unfavourable/Incompetent Uterus

Confinement

Babies are delivered by the provider

Failed attempt at VBAC

Lazy Uterus

Boggy Fundus

Floppy Cervix

Train Wrecks (describes a woman who is brought into hospital after a failed homebirth attempt)

Braxton-Hicks (named after the man who first “discovered” them)

Although the midwives present could see how using such metaphors and adjectives might have a negative impact on a pregnant woman, they also felt unable to challenge this within the medical setting. Aside from the metaphor of the confined woman, some of the other commonly associated metaphors with birthing women in the West are: the hero/warrior,⁴⁷ the labourer/producer,⁴⁸ and the (technocratic)⁴⁹ consumer.⁵⁰

As part of *caesura* (2013), I wanted to work with the metaphor of the hero, and began to research the evolution of the myth of the hero. I was particularly interested in Theseus as the hero who defeated the minotaur in the labyrinth at Knossos, mainly because of the presence of Ariadne as the key to his success. In their exposition of the myth, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford describe its development from a lunar to a solar myth, with its emphasis on *conflict* and *mastery* (Baring and Cashford 1991: 285). Although the origins of the myth would suggest that the hero was male, Baring and Cashford propose that through its evolution, it came to represent the archetypal masculine aspect in all human beings, and was a metaphor for the questing consciousness in search of a goal (ibid: 285). I could certainly identify with this throughout my first pregnancy: I thought birth was something I could **prepare** for and **succeed** at. Baring and Cashford outline that the hero cannot ‘reach the treasure with their rational minds, which sunder everything into opposites, but only with the help of deeper instinctual levels of the psyche.’ (ibid: 294) The hero usually has some supernatural aid, be it the Gods or the Goddess (ibid: 285). Their success will depend on accessing deep levels of feeling and intuition, what we might refer to as one’s *feminine powers*, which is often

⁴⁷ See Thomson and Downe (2012) and England and Horowitz (1998)

⁴⁸ See Martin (1987)

⁴⁹ Selin & Stone give an overview of the ways in which technocratic births, which have been championed in Western medical institutions, now becoming more important to non-Western societies as a mark of how civilised, modern and affluent they are (2009: xiv).

⁵⁰ Della Pollock traces the history of the consumer birth to the seventeenth century, when (male) physicians, or *accoucheurs*, began to deliver babies with their array of *tools* (forceps, hooks and drugs), which traditional midwives did not have. Women paid to have access to these tools, in the hope that, one would think, her pain in birth would be eased (1999: 14)

represented by a female character in myths, such as Ariadne, without whom Theseus cannot overcome the Minotaur.

After my first son was born, the last thing I felt like was heroic. I felt more like I had been ravaged by whatever it was I had met in the centre of the labyrinth, and that a part of me had never come back out. I felt like I had no power. When it came to making this performance, I wanted to re-engage with this metaphor and find a way to re-write it based on my experience. Midwife and writer Pam England has used labyrinths as metaphors to describe the *ruptures* of the *inner experience* a woman has during her childbearing year. She coined the term Laborinth to refer to the way that labour is not linear, but a ‘continuous, winding, twisting-and-turning’ experience (England 2010: 21). Labour, she says, can be disorienting and induce doubt and confusion, as the hairpin bends keep appearing:

As the pathways wind back and forth towards the centre of the labyrinth, you may begin thinking that you are back where you started, or that you are getting nowhere, or that you are moving away from your “goal.” The same thing often happens during labor [sic]. From time to time, like most mothers, you will feel “lost” in labor because when you are *in* labor, you can’t see how far you’ve come, or how close you are to giving birth. (ibid)

Theseus and the Minotaur

Theseus, tribute and son of the king of Athens, must enter the labyrinth at the Palace of Knossos in Crete and slay the minotaur at the centre in the hope of setting his country free. Before he enters, however, the princess Ariadne falls in love with him, and in a move against her father, King Minos of Knossos, she gives Theseus a skein of thread to take in with him. Tying it to the outside of the labyrinth, Theseus unravels the thread on his path inwards, and once he has defeated the minotaur in the centre, he can find his way back out again. Other young tributes attempt this feat every year, but have always failed as none of them have been able to find their way out again.

Read as history, the myth is a metaphor to describe the shift in goddess-centred Minoan culture to a god-based Greek culture on the island of Crete (Baring and Cashford 1991: 139). The labyrinth of Knossos is the caesura between two cultures- it signifies the place between; the turning point. Read as a story of the human condition, the myth captures the essence of the hero’s journey with its quest, its twists and turns, its defeat over the darkness, and the

return to the light. In a Feminist re-visioning of this myth, what lies at the heart of the labyrinth if it's not the deadly Minotaur who might devour us entirely? Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington uses labyrinths extensively in her paintings, including *Ferret Race* (1950-1), *Forbidden Fruit* (1969), *Sanctuary for Furies* (1974) and *Labyrinth* (1991). Populated with animals, shadow-people and mythic creatures, the labyrinth becomes a symbol of the transformational and alchemical journey.



In another of her paintings (above), *And Then we saw the Daughter of the Minotaur* (1953), Carrington depicts a scene of two young boys (the artist's sons) arriving (in the centre of the labyrinth perhaps) in their dark capes to meet two mythical creatures. One, a white bull dressed in a red gown, is the minotaur's daughter, her horns invoking the mythic image of Hathor, the Egyptian cow-Goddess who commonly helps women in childbirth. The other figure, a creature with a triangular, transparent face, unfurling from the head like the petals of a white rose, is perhaps the White Goddess herself, who influenced much of Carrington's work after reading Robert Graves. In this piece, Carrington subverts the traditional Greek myth by transforming the scene at the centre from one of violence and death to one of innocence and initiation.

Could a woman sit in the centre?
Will they come to sit with her?
How long will she wait?
What happens when they come?

The Performance

We must give the audience time to think and space to see.
(Robert Wilson describing negative spaces, quoted in Holmberg 1996: 147)

As a design, the labyrinth contains a number of caesurae: the space at the threshold; the pause after approaching, and before entering. The pathways themselves are negative spaces created by the lines of the design. In the centre there is a third caesura: a place of stillness between coming and going.



Having decided that I would use a labyrinth as the main feature of my design for the performance, I began to explore the possibilities for action in it and around it. I wanted to

create (a) time-space for each audience member to have their own experience, albeit ‘curated’ by me. It was important, therefore, to create an intimate atmosphere in order for this to be effective. Allowing audience members to be alone with me in the space seemed like the best way of achieving this. At the same time as I developed my physical score by using material from the narrative of my birth experience, I wanted to sit in one of the negative spaces for as long as possible. I decided to sit in the centre of the labyrinth- reminiscent of the way Pam England describes the post-partum journey of the woman who has given birth: sometimes they don’t move out of the *laborinth* for many years. So, I sat in the centre for 6 hours, with audience members coming and going.

When two people sit together in this intimate, yet expansive space, each breath is heard, is shared, offered outwards. Her open hand reaches toward the other. Gesture as an opening to the other, as a going towards the other, that ‘bring[s] together, receive[s] and welcome[s]’ (Gablik 1991: 71). The listening gesture- done slowly it hears itself. Gesture as speaking and listening at the same time. Gesture as sensation manifested. Gesture as mediality.⁵¹ When the performer’s breath and movement is slowed down, this exchange becomes more intensified. As Lehmann says, the ‘live, trembling human sculpture, the movement sculpture between torpor and vitality, leads to the exposure of the spectator’s voyeuristic gaze onto the performer’ (Lehmann 2006: 165). In postdramatic theatre this is less about the classical ideal, but rather ‘for the sake of a painful confrontation with imperfection’ (ibid). Lehmann’s description of the body goes on to suggest that the postdramatic actor has the potential to retrieve the experience of ‘thing-ness’ by moving between the poles of victim and aggressor. This is heightened in one to one performances.⁵²



In her *Study Room Guide on One to One Performance*, Rachel Zerihan suggests that one to one performances take a collaborative format, in which two people create a shared experience, ‘responsive and dialectic as opposed to imposed and prescribed’ and requiring ‘trust, commitment and a willingness to partake in the encounter’ (Zerihan 2009: 3). In this way, Zerihan asserts, the performer gives the spectator a gift of ‘response-ability,’ which reveals the role of agency within performance (ibid). In the study guide, Zerihan asks each of her 12 performance artist-collaborators to comment on the relevance of intimacy, risk, consent, confession, therapy, uneasiness within their work. I imagine she asks me the question. I respond to her, conversationally, here.

Rachel: Could you comment on one of the following in your One to One work – intimacy, risk, consent, confession, therapy, uneasiness?

Tracy: I have concerns with the fact that as a woman making work about my experience of a traumatic childbirth that it is often considered as a kind of pseudo-therapy by others. My issue with this is that when artwork is described as therapy, there is always a judgmental undertone that is writing the work off as less meaningful, or interesting in an artistic sense. Suzi Gablik addresses this in her description of the ways that modernism has encouraged artists to make work that is ‘difficult, wilfully inaccessible and disturbing to the audience - in some sense a contest of wills’ (Gablik 1991: 60). This kind of art bows down to what she describes as ‘the heroic ego’ (ibid). My work is certainly therapeutic for me to the extent that it always offers an opportunity for transformation. If it is not working ‘on’ me, I have no interest in it. But I am very conscious that this is not enough for an audience most of the time, so my process involves trying to create a performance structure that offers me the internal space I need, as well as offering the audience enough aesthetic framing that they have something to ‘hold onto’. I am working with very sensitive experiences and I do undertake a process of therapy or healing alongside the performance-making. I don’t want my artwork to become the only vehicle for personal transformation. It is important for me to ‘own’ my process of healing - I don’t want it to be appropriated, which is what happens when others project themselves on to it: “I know how you feel” “I went through the same thing” “It couldn’t be as bad as what I experienced” etc.



As humans we project onto each other all the time - Franko B talks about it in your study guide. The curator at MOMA discussed it when he was being interviewed about Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present*.⁵³ The artist who understands this, and who is able to develop a practice that allows them to sit in a place of what I would call the 'witness,' and Abramovic calls 'zero ground',⁵⁴ learns how not to project on to others, and instead learns to experience and witness the projections that others put onto them more clearly. The other becomes a mirror. From this place I am interested in developing mutual empathy. So I am aware that when I dress the way I do in *caesura*, and carry out the actions of sewing a thread on to my dress I am simulating my caesarean wound. This is not a physically painful action for me, and I don't act like it is. I am not trying to enact my pain, trauma, or healing. The sewing action is a representation of the process of integration that I underwent: I healed myself. I was the agent of my own recovery. However, I don't have any threads to sew with in the centre where I sit - for this I depend on other people to arrive and to give me their thread. Through the performance I realised that healing is an intersubjective experience. I am the agent, but I need other people, and everyone brings something unique.

⁵³ *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present* (2012) [Film]

⁵⁴ *ibid*

As people walked through the labyrinth, I was very surprised by the unique sound of each person walking. I hadn't anticipated it. But I could hear the differences in the rhythm and the weight of each person's footsteps, and in the sound of the way people sat down opposite me. This felt like a very intimate exchange: people revealed the sound of themselves to me, people gave me their thread when I put my hand out for it. Although this was the request, they didn't have to give it to me, and if they chose not to, then I would have been unable to complete the sewing action. The risk was therefore aesthetic rather than 'real'. The performance was a bit unsatisfying for me in this sense - it remained on a level of representation for the main part. Although of course the durational aspect was real for me. The structure I had planned was never broken because everyone did what they were invited to do: they followed the path, literally and metaphorically. Perhaps if I wasn't blindfolded, and looking at each person, something else might have been able to break through... I know some people who took part felt unsatisfied about this aspect, whereas others found it less intimidating by not being 'seen' by me.

Ultimately the performance worked on a poetic level I think: replacing the minotaur at the heart of the labyrinth with the mother's body. Like the minotaur, she is waiting for people to arrive, but instead of killing them, she is reminded of her wholeness through their presence. Each visit produces a seed for new life. Each visit brings another thread that will eventually help her to move out of the labyrinth again. So instead of being an encounter with savagery and death, it becomes about an encounter with stillness, silence, patience, companionship, and ultimately a return to life.



2 Rehearsals for a Birth Story (2015)

As outlined in Chapter 1, women usually construct their birth stories long before they give birth to their children. They use knowledge gleaned from reading birth manuals and attending ante-natal classes, information assimilated from hearing other women's birth stories, to build a picture of the experience they would like to have. My experience was no different from this for my first birth. The second time around, however, I found myself trying not to plan because I had learned, painfully, that we do not always have the experience we plan for. Perhaps put more precisely, I spent much of my second pregnancy trying not to become attached to a particular outcome whilst at the same time praying for a less traumatic experience. This may be true of all major experiences in our lives: we want to know what it will be like, so we feel empowered, and less afraid of the unknown. Giving birth, however, does not follow any one particular pattern and it is impossible to predict how it will go, even once labour has begun. *Rehearsals for a Birth Story (2015)* asks what is the relationship between language, silence and the quest for *knowing* in the construction of a narrative of a birth event yet-to-happen? And how can this be performed?

As outlined in Chapter 3, Merleau-Ponty suggests we attempt to construct a full image of the thing we are looking at based on what *we do* see: 'we delve into the thickness' of it - we inhabit it - we constitute it from the inside, developing a living connection between the thing and our bodies (2002: 237). In what ways can the invisible, unseen aspects of an event-to-come be performed? How is this related to waiting? *Rehearsals for a Birth Story (2015)* investigates the relationship between silence, sound and speaking in what I describe as the field of listening. Specifically, I explore the physics and the phenomenology of interrupting sound as a framework for exploring interruptions in subjectivity, as well as considering the impact the sound of things (cymatics) has on the process of subject-making.

I know I can't know what will happen-

How it will be-

Yet still-

I reach for knowing-

Please watch the AV documentation of *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015) before reading the following text.

Feedback Loop

In *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (2008), Michel Serres explores the poetic-philosophic implications of perception. The body, he reminds us, is both transmitter and receiver, in which language is manufactured out of warm vibrations (Sellers 2008: 110). It is this feedback loop, which ‘guarantees the audibility of our own voice’ and it is the ear ‘that guarantees and regulates the mouth, which emits noise in part for the speaker, and in part for others, who in turn guarantee other feedback loops’ (ibid). In a performance context in which only the performer speaks, the ‘feedback’ from the audience often arrives at the performer in subtle noise-forms: shuffling, coughing, silence, or ‘our pleasures and discomforts, fits and silences, the beginning of language’ (ibid: 111). Serres suggests we might call these cycles self-awareness, or in a group setting (the performance), the social contract: they give us the potential to be *opened* by our experience of them, but ‘more often than not [we are] closed by these cycles’ (ibid). Information comes to us from the given, which are the entropic large-scale energies in our environment and our bodies, and which for Serres are always hard. Softness on the other hand comes to us through language: the signs of the given, and never the thing itself (ibid: 113-114). Hardness softens through sensation - through a process of encoding that takes place inside our bodies. This does not require language: children and animals understand sensation without any words (ibid: 115).

The mother’s body grows softer.
Her face softens.
She smiles more often.
Her belly shelters him from hardness.
He whose body is not yet fully formed,
he who has not yet been given the gift of language,
but who feels and senses her body in his voice,
her voice in his body.
I have landed in this soft place.

According to Serres, however, the unfolding process of sensation itself remains elusive. He describes the mechanics of 'how it works' using the image of a black box. On one side of the box there is the (hard) world, and on the other there is (soft) information, which might become meaning. There is an exchange of energy that takes place within the box so that the energy of things from the world (for example, disturbances of the air, vibrations, heat, alcohol, photons) is transformed into information (signals, figures, languages, meaning). Although we do not know the location of the box, 'nor how it alters what flows through it' (ibid: 129), we can describe it as a receptive process, 'bathed in silence' (ibid: 136). How, then, do these concepts of feedback and perception translate into performance? Can I create enough silence in a performance, within the writing and the performing of it, in order to soften, so that I can hear the other's body in mine? And how does this receptivity to my own bodily sensation, or somatic experience, effect the feedback loop that I establish with my audience? These are some of the questions that began to emerge in the early stages of the research for this performance.

Typography and rhythm

Caesura (n): 1550s, from Latin caesura, 'metrical pause', literally 'a cutting', from past participle stem of caedere: 'to cut down'

Occurring in poetry and music, a caesura denotes a break in the sound of the flow of verse or a pause in a melody which marks a rhythmic point of division. The interruption is usually marked by the poet or composer. In poetry, caesurae can occur at the end of lines where the pause is usually marked with punctuation, but where it occurs within a line, it is often where the natural pause for breath would take place. The caesura in poetry adds musicality to the reading of a poem. Thus, the caesura is only of note in the spoken articulation of the poem. It rests on the breathing of the speaker. For the unskilled poetry reader, caesurae may be added throughout the poem that will create a particular rhythm, which may add very little to the meaning of the poem. The skilled poetry reader, however, upon understanding the metre and meaning of the poem, will mark the pauses in such a way that the sound of the poem will carry its meaning through the rhythm. As Nietzsche has noted, 'to mistake the rhythm of a sentence is to mistake the very meaning of the sentence' (quoted in Derrida 1989: 33).

Simon Shepherd writes about the way a play can work on an audience through the agency of the actor's body rhythm 'which stimulates response in audience bodies.' The actor (or speaker) embodies the rhythm of the text/poem, and in its articulation the listener can come into the same rhythm, or at least have their own daily rhythm confirmed (Shepherd 2013: 85). It is only through the use of caesura, or hiatus (interruptions, breaks, pauses), that the rhythm is established. In *listening* to this rhythm there are two types of attention that are possible: focal and global (Oliveros 2005: 13). The language and movement of the performer engage the spectators actively and usually encourage attention to focus on the detail of it, whereas the pauses, silences, gaps, allow the spectator to drop in between language into a more global awareness, which allows them to take in the action taking place in front of them and situate this within the whole of the space/time continuum (which includes themselves).

I wanted to explore the relationship between language and silence within this performance and worked using repetition in particular to create poly-rhythms. The soundscape was built up progressively through each series of actions, which were recorded on a loop station. Over the top of this, I spoke a series of texts, which again were written using repetition and playing with the tenses to ensure the narrator was constantly shifting. As part of this writing, I used typography in a way that added emphasis to the breaks in the rhythm of speaking it – more specifically, the double-footed caesura || hyphen - and ellipsis ...

|| I'm having a baby.||

I'm || going to have a baby.

|| I'm expecting.||

I'm || expecting...||

I'm || || expecting...||

2

|| The pregnancy is going smoothly.

The first time -

|| The pregnancy || went smoothly.||

The pregnancy was smooth-

There were no complications

(So) I was expecting...||

|| I'm waiting... ||

|| I'm hoping... ||

|| I'm planning... ||

||How can I plan || for that? ||

This approach added spaces of/for silence within the speaking, in which something else could arrive – the ‘surprise of the real.’ I discuss this further in the next chapter.

Interrupting Sound

Sound travels in continuous waves. If the soundwaves are interrupted they will do one of four things:

1. Reflection: bounce back towards the source, causing an echo
2. Diffraction: bend around the obstacle without crossing over the boundary
3. Transmission: cross the boundary into the new material or obstacle
4. Refraction: once transmission has taken place, there is a subsequent change in speed and direction.⁵⁵

Within the practical research for my performance, my enquiry led me to explore the possibilities of Soundbeam technology. Soundbeam is a touch-free device which uses sensor technology to translate movement into sound.⁵⁶ An invisible, ultrasonic tone is emitted from a tone generator. When a body or an object interrupts the soundwave by moving or stepping through it, then it creates a break in the wave. Each wave can be programmed to have these breaks act as triggers for pre-programmed sounds or musical notes. Thus, each space-of-rupture has its own sound-marker. Each wave has as many ruptures as you wish to programme, spread over a length of a few centimetres up to 4/5 metres. Working with ultrasound was a rich metaphorical exercise, as it reminded me of the process of the ultrasound in a woman's pregnancy. In an ultrasound scan the computer is programmed to generate a visual representation of the matter that it encounters as the ruptures.⁵⁷ How could Soundbeam allow me to incorporate ruptured sound within the performance composition?

⁵⁵ See Boundary Behaviour at <http://www.physicsclassroom.com/class/sound/Lesson-3/Boundary-Behavior>

⁵⁶ See Soundbeam website at <http://www.soundbeam.co.uk/>

⁵⁷ Anna Furse explores this extensively in *Glass Body* (2006b).

Although the technology performs these ruptures within the soundscape, after a couple of weeks of practical experimentation with Soundbeam, I felt that the ruptures it created were too ‘loud,’ and dominated the soundscape. I went on to explore how I could use other forms of technology to create ruptures within a fixed soundscape, so that the caesura was still being performed, but the experience of listening to it was more like slipping in and out of the gap, rather than falling and tumbling into it. Working with three poems which I had written based on my own birth experience, I experimented with a range of effects on a computer-based sound programme (Ableton)⁵⁸ to bring this about. Each track incorporates a number of mediations to alter pitch, speed, frequency and input levels, as well as adding delays, reverb, echo, looping and distortion. The programme also featured a randomiser function, which allowed me to incorporate an element of ‘chance’ into each track.

As well as considering ways of interrupting sound, I also wanted to explore the materiality of sound – to see how sound moves us literally. Within the field of cymatics, we are able to discover the way matter is shaped by sound and vibration. In a fusion of science and art, eighteenth century German physicist and musician Ernst Chladni experimented and documented his pioneering work in cymatics in *Entdeckungen über die Theorie des Klanges* (*Discoveries on the theory of sound*) in 1787. Chladni used a flat brass plate, on which he sprinkled a light dusting of sand, and played it with a violin bow. He noticed that depending on where he placed the bow, different geometric shapes were formed in the sand. This brass-plate techniques is known as Chladni Plates.⁵⁹ The term cymatics, however, was only coined in 1967 by Swiss doctor and scientist Hans Jenny. By this point Jenny had the technology available to him to explore how matter could be moved using an electronic tonal input which he called the tonoscope. As part of the research phase I explored both manual and technological approaches. I used a tone generator connected to a speaker, on top of which I placed a shallow dish of water. Once the sound is turned on, the water begins to move in specific shapes and patterns depending on the tone. When a light is shone on this pattern, we can begin to see the geometric shapes. In an attempt to mediate and interrupt these shapes, I took it one step further and filmed the water, which was then projected onto a large screen. I used a small torch as the light source, which meant that only parts of the shapes were being picked up and projected. Using a vision mixer, I was able to add a feedback function into the projected image, so what we began to see on the screen was something quite different to what

⁵⁸ See Ableton website at <https://www.ableton.com/en/>

⁵⁹ See http://www.cymascope.com/cyma_research/history.html

was happening in the water. The effect was like the fusion of cells: the beginning of life forms, almost.



Cymatic experiment with a speaker, bowl and water

I also wanted to explore the cymatic effect using my voice as the tonal input, so I created a homemade tonoscope using a selection of plastic plumbing pipes and fixtures. In order to play the instrument, I made a cover for the end, using an embroidery frame with a skin of tightly pulled latex. Once the skin was placed on top, I sprinkled fine sand on it, before blowing into the mouthpiece. Similar to using the electronic tone generator, when the pitch of my voice was altered, different shapes were formed on the skin: the lower the tone, the simpler the shape pattern.⁶⁰ The most basic shape I could make was concentric circles.



Homemade tonoscope using plumbing fixtures and pipes

Not 'ah' but 'oh' she told her -
'Ah' takes you up, out of yourself
'Ah' is for pain

⁶⁰ To see this more closely, please visit a short youtube clip that I made with my son
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYINBWCy0c0>

‘Ah’ thinks -
‘Oh’ brings you down
‘Oh’ admits you
‘Oh’ opens you up
‘Oh’ feels.

Oh softening cervix -
Opening to you-
Oh my child.

The Performance

Rehearsals for a Birth Story was performed in the Foundry Studio, Aberystwyth University in March 2015. It was a 45-minute studio performance based around a series of tasks that are completed by the performer. The sounds produced were recorded on a loop station, so that a rich soundscape develops during the course of the piece. The tasks are interspersed with live spoken text.



The performance space is split into five areas: the outer four each correspond to an element (air, earth, water, fire) and contain materials related to this element. In between each area there is a microphone suspended from the ceiling. The fifth, inner area, where the performance begins and ends has a long piece of red fabric on the floor. I am lying in the centre of the space in a circle of red fabric as the audience enters. I am moving a Doppler machine around my belly, trying to pick up the baby’s heartbeat. Once everyone is in, I speak into a microphone, whilst listening to the heartbeat.

We write our story before it begins.

We write it as we dream it to be.

We write it as we think it should be.

We write believing we can know what will happen.

We write our story before it begins,
And then feel more ready to begin -
To step into what we have already written.
Something known.

We begin our story as we have written it.
We begin and we make changes as we go.
We add new details, take others out.

We begin our story and rewrite it as we go.
(From *Writing our Story*, Pamphlet 2: *Rehearsals for a Birth Story*)



Repeated motif of labyrinth/spiral as two of the actions

I then move anti-clockwise around the space carrying out a series of actions at stations and recording the sounds of each. I pause in between each station to speak text into the microphone. I completes the performance by returning to the centre, where I fold and unfold my body in a long stretch of red fabric.



Following the performance, I took part in a discussion around the themes of the work. One of the questions I was asked was about the aesthetic choice of including my (still unborn) child within the dramaturgical framework. I repeat the question here, as a way of discussing the aesthetics of this performance, which allows me to explore more fully the relationship between the real and the poetic. I also being to explore the ethics of these decisions, which will be more fully explored in the next essay on *AfterBirth* (2016).

To what extent is this work a conscious decision on your part to create an aesthetic based on the parent-child relationship? Or, put another way, are you making work about your child for aesthetic reasons – because you want to ask questions about the parent/child relationship and representations of this in performance, perhaps?

I started my life in theatre inspired by the work of Augusto Boal, who created Forum theatre as a way of working with people through oppression, in order to bring about real changes in their lives. In Forum Theatre, as I'm sure you'll be familiar with, non-actors recreate real situations that they have experienced. Facilitated by a 'Joker,' and following a set of rules for interventions, the audience who become active players, or spect-actors, interrupt the drama and get involved themselves in order to attempt to change the outcome. It is a rehearsal for what they could do in their real lives. Yet, Boal acknowledges that performance is 'both action in itself and preparation for future actions' (quoted in Feagin 2014: 19).

In all of my work I am interested in affect: for both the performer and the audiences. As a writer, I am more likely to use poetry rather than realism or documentary form, and so I am interested in thinking about the ways that a poetic register brings about transformation. How does the poetic affect the real, the given, the lived experience? In *caesura* (2013) I was working on a poetic level – the action didn't move (far) beyond the representational, and yet it affected me. The somatic experience I had changed my sense of self through the course of the performance, and in the days and weeks afterwards. When I come to make a new piece of work, I never really have a clear sense of the aesthetic at the beginning – I don't choose it. It tends to arrive as I play and experiment with materials, movement, sound etc. I am always starting from the place that I am. When I started making this performance I was also pregnant, and therefore the pregnancy became part of the 'story.' It would seem odd to me to not have included that when I am exploring autobiographical performance making. If I hadn't been pregnant at the time I was making the work, then I would have made a very different

piece. In this way, I didn't set out to explore a specific aesthetic tied to pregnancy, rather that aesthetic was found because I was becoming a mother for the second time.

I follow the school of thought that art and aesthetics are not separate from life and living, which has been well described by contributors to the recent collection *Aesthetics of Everyday Life*.⁶¹ I would describe this performance as an expression of life – my life – me – at a very specific time in my life. The aesthetics are drawn from this. So within the range of objects I include, there are a number of domestic and household objects used (balloons, chicken wire, fan, plumbing pipes, embroidery hoop, TV), which sit alongside a variety of technical equipment (loop station, microphones, cameras, projector, wires). These are arranged with a specific artistic aesthetic of evoking the rehearsal room, a space where things are in a state of being in-progress/becoming fixed. To return to Boal's work, although I work more with metaphor through my use of objects and materials (whereas Boal's work is using real-life examples), like Boal, I want to explore the aesthetics of experience, rather than of objects. The objects I use are based on the kind of experience they offer me. This is what I want to draw attention to. So, for example, when I turn the fan on its side and place the balloon in the airstream, it gives me an opportunity to think about/witness verticality, gravity and flight. This is juxtaposed with my physical heaviness in pregnancy. I wonder about spirit and matter, inspiration and falling. This inner experience then comes to bear on the way I speak the text that follows.



Rehearsals for 'Rehearsals for a Birth Story'

⁶¹ This is the subject of *Aesthetics of Everyday Life: East and West* (2014). Editors Liu Yuedi and Curtis L. Carter trace the philosophies of Heidegger through Wittgenstein and Dewey, whose philosophies reflect an interest in the application of aesthetics to everyday life (2014: xi), and all of whom reject a subject-object dichotomy (ibid: xii).

In *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* I am preparing for the story I might tell after the birth of my child. By preparing for the story, I am anticipating the experience. I am rehearsing the script: what I will say, what I won't say. I am also rehearsing listening - to the words and the silence. Perhaps it would be best described as an aesthetic of anticipation, which the state of pregnancy typifies, but is not exclusive to pregnant subjectivity.

3 *AfterBirth* (2016)

AfterBirth (2016) investigates the experience of a collaboration between mother and child in a performance that tells the birth story of the child. By introducing a second 'author,' the mother's story is immediately disrupted: she must now talk with and to him: he who was also part of that experience. *AfterBirth* started its life called *Mother Tongue*. My central research questions throughout remained the same: how do I tell the birth stories of my sons with/to them in performance and how would I perform myself as mother in a performance? I needed to find a 'language' for the experiences I wanted to express - a mother's tongue, perhaps. In her public address to a gathering of young female students at Bryn Mawr College in 1986, Ursula le Guin describes the mother tongue (Le Guin 1989). It is the language, she says, we learn from our mothers; we all know it by heart:

The mother tongue, spoken or written, expects an answer. It is conversation, a word the root of which means "turning together." The mother tongue is language not as mere communication but as relation, relationship. It connects. It goes two ways, many ways, an exchange, a network. Its power is not in dividing but in binding, not in distancing but in uniting. (ibid)⁶²

Yet how could I acknowledge some of the most painful and transformative moments of my life to my almost nine-year old son? How could I find a way of expressing *my* feelings whilst *at the same time* respecting *his* needs for safety and gentleness?

I made a list. I could:

- Tell them their birth story (they have heard it previously), but which version?
- Tell them another story and use that as a metaphor for their birth story

⁶² I think it would be more accurate to call this the maternal-tongue, which can be gender neutral, as fathers could also teach it and use it with their children.

- Tell them the story of their name, and incorporate some of their birth story
- Do something else, like bake a cake or play, and ‘drop’ some of their story in, incidentally.

Initially, I decided on incorporating another activity in, and we planned to bake a birthday cake (and also to build a fortress of salt around a pool of water that Oscar, the baby, would sit in, playing quietly). However, as the process developed (and it became clear that Oscar regarded walls as something to climb over), I felt a growing pressure to decide which ‘mother’ I would be performing:

the calm, patient mother dealing effectively with a baby who does not want to do what he was being asked to do: keeping everything under control;

the frazzled mother running between children and tasks: trying to keep everyone safe, and to get everything done;

the playful mother who finds fun ways to distract the children: keeping them occupied and engaged, and perhaps deciding to forget about getting things done;

the busy mother who ignores what the children are doing in order to get her work done: she gets the older child to look after the younger child so she has as few interruptions as possible.



Salty Studio Play

In an attempt to link the research project with my ‘real-time’ life with my sons, I identified the following list of central questions:

1. How do I create the personal, private space needed to speak to the boys about their births with a public audience?
2. If the boys are present in the live performance: a/ how do I avoid performing the ‘perfect mother’ and b/ how do I make it comfortable and enjoyable for them?
3. Gwion knows a lot about how he was born already, how do I avoid simply retelling him what he already knows for the sake of a public audience? How can it be meaningful in some way for him?
4. Oscar is 10 months old. He doesn’t speak yet. How do I ‘tell’ him, and again create a meaningful experience for him, given that the ways he makes meaning is much more basic on a cognitive level, and completely rooted in the body?
5. What aspect of the birth stories do I want to speak about with them? Why? What impact might this have on them?
6. Is this enquiry about finding models of speaking that we can use to tell our children their birth stories?
7. Do the audience hear MORE details than the boys?
8. Will I ever tell the boys about the difficult experiences I had? How will Gwion feel about my first performance (*twenty minutes* 2012) for example when he is older?
9. What is interesting for an audience in this personal, intimate exchange?
10. What has rhythm got to do with it?

Fundamentally these were ethical concerns to do with responsibilities of trust and care towards my children first and foremost, and then also to the various selves that were part of this process. It felt as though there were at least three different *I*’s working on this that I could differentiate: the artist-*I*; the researcher-*I*; the mother-*I*. Each voice had different aims and demanded different aesthetics, and sometimes ethics. In the next section I will some of the underlying issues and the creative approaches that I took to resolve them.

Please watch the AV documentation of *AfterBirth* (2015) before reading the following text.

Togetherness/Otherness

I want to explore some of the features of a collaboration between a mother and child as a way of framing a type of maternal subjectivity. Moving away from the other as stranger, towards Cixous' 'familiar stranger' and relationship and unity, I will consider how collaboration might be a gift, in the Derridean sense: a gift of presence. When a mother makes herself present both to her child *and* herself/selves, she engages in an act of radical expansion. She stretches rather than distances herself, binds rather than divides. I call this radical because the patriarchal, dualist, medical way of relating is to distance and separate the mother from her child from the moment he is born,⁶³ but also radical from its etymological origins of Latin *radix*, meaning root. By including her child within her performance, a mother enacts a feminist politics that resists this dominant cultural mediation, and increases her capacity for attention and, ultimately, love. But there are also risks and sacrifices.

Although the togetherness of collaboration might be a challenging aspect of a collaboration between *strangers*, between a mother and her child, this togetherness is part of the way they relate to each other all the time. But have they *worked* together before? How will they *work* together? When they work together does the mother stay in her mother-role, or does she become her working-performer-self? How will her child respond if she moves between roles? Who is this other that I seek to collaborate with? And thus, what is the nature of our collaboration? In what ways is the collaborative process different when my collaborator is my child?

Instead of thinking about our children as products, multiples or extensions of ourselves, Hélène Cixous suggests we describe our children as *familiar strangers*. They are wholly other. They are strange, foreign to us. And yet, borne from my flesh, my blood, my child is also intimately familiar to me: 'The child is the other but the other without violence. The other rhythm, the pure freshness, the possible's body. Complete fragility. But vastness itself' (Cixous and Clément 1986: 90). I began to think about my relationship to my child in terms of movement along a continuum: he is close to me (familiar) and then further away (strange). I connected this to my attention: I could be towards/for him (letting my attention outwards), or I could move towards myself/for me (pulling my attention inwards). This, for me, was

⁶³ See Michel Odent (2007)

connected to the methods Oliveros uses in global/focal listening, which involves an expansive/dilated attention. I could sense a force behind this placing of attention: he could call my attention, and I was pulled towards him, and something within me could demand my attention, and I would be pulled back inside. We are separate, yet my attention could connect us. At almost-nine-years old he is fully aware when I am sharing my attention with him or not.



We are driving to Aberystwyth for our rehearsal. It's an 80 mile journey that takes 2 hours through the mountains of mid Wales. Although Gwion has been fine about going, once we get in the car he says he wished he didn't have to go today, he doesn't want to do a long car journey. "So we are going to have to play some games to make it interesting," he says. I-Spy, a spelling quiz... I am aware that after about 20 minutes of playing together my thoughts are moving to what we will do today - the things I need to set up, what times colleagues are popping by to have a look, what are the burning questions I need to sort out... This is precious time in the studio, and I want to make the most of it. Another spelling. I'm taking longer and longer to respond. I can feel my attention drifting completely from the car, our shared space, and into my own thoughts. The requests for games starts to feel like a drag - I can literally feel it on the skin of my face - like someone is tugging at my skin. I explain that I need to think about things for a little while and that we can play another game in a bit. At first he seems disappointed. But he's always so generous and patient that he doesn't insist on

me staying with him. And after a few minutes, when the tugging has stopped and I have had some time to just be with my own thoughts, I can move back outwards again. I check on him. He is absorbed in his own thoughts now. I touch his leg, "Ok?" "Just thinking," he says, and he carries on in his own space. After some time in silence, I turn the radio on. We sing together.

How is maternal subjectivity then connected to attention? If I consider that it is my responsibility to attend to his needs, and at the same time acknowledge that I must also attend to my own needs, then by moving between my responsibility (through attention giving) to myself and my responsibility to my son, I am performing a compromise. I can be with him, wholly for him only if I can be with myself, wholly for myself. As Derrida puts it: 'I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others' (Derrida 1996: 68). I wonder if simultaneity is possible. I practice by moving between me and him, here and there. I am not jumping between two objects, in-me then in-him. I don't split myself in two to reach him. I don't leave myself to reach him. I am stretching myself towards him. When I reach him, there is still a gap between us. When I stay with him, I am choosing responsibility for him over me in that moment. When I choose to be responsible for him, the part of me that is foregrounded is the mother-self. It is an act of tenderness. To him. From me. Tenderness requires sacrifice. Sometimes, for mother-artists this sacrifice can create a tension between maintaining one's connection with one's work/one's self and giving care and attention to one's child. As Andrea Liss says in *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (2013):

Oftentimes the mother's desires collide with her artist self. What distinguishes the feminist mother from the patriarchal model of the mother [...] is that the feminist mother cannot carry the myth of the all-loving, all-forgiving and all-sacrificing mother. She still loves, forgives and sacrifices for her child(ren), but not at the expense of the fullness of herself. It is not a matter of "balancing motherhood and work," as the media culture likes to insidiously simplify matters, as if we are really living in a "post-feminist" world. It is the feminist mother's admission that ambiguity is often the norm, an ambiguity that constantly tears and heals between the mother self and the professional self, between the mother self and her sexual self, between the mother self and her own child self. (Liss 2013: xvii)

For other women motherhood is likely to be something they don't want because this sacrifice is too significant. In an interview with *Der Tagesspiegel* in 2016, Marina Abramovic stated:

I had three abortions because I was certain that it would be a disaster for my work. One only has limited energy in the body, and I would have had to divide it [...] In my

opinion that's the reason why women aren't as successful as men in the art world. There's plenty of talented women. Why do men take over the important positions? It's simple. Love, family, children—a woman doesn't want to sacrifice all of that.⁶⁴

As discussed with regards to the aesthetics of *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015), my choice to work with my son/s was as much out of necessity as it was for artistic or academic reasons: I needed to find ways to make work, to carry out my research, whilst being near my children (when I started working on *AfterBirth* (2016) I had just had my second son and was still breastfeeding him). This, then for me, was an ergonomic choice above all else. Before considering the ethics of this relationship, I would like to think about the economics of it. In an attempt to challenge a capitalist/masculinist reading of why I work with my children, in which my children might become the subjects of my work and therefore increase my capital and potential to earn through making performances about them, I would like to find a feminine economy to frame my collaboration with them.

Collaboration as Gift of Presence

To what extent can we describe the way a mother breathes for her babe-in-the-womb as a gift? And later, how might we describe her attention, her act of responsibility, her love, as a gift? For Derrida, giving is an aporia, a paradox: the conditions of its possibility are also the conditions of its impossibility. For something to be truly a gift in this light, it cannot appear as such (Derrida 1996: 29). Not only must the giver remain anonymous, she must not even recognise that she is giving something in order to avoid any related sense of worthiness. Furthermore, a gift is annulled by a thank-you or any other type of acknowledgement, which acts as a gesture of repayment. Giving is disassociated from receiving and taking (Derrida 1992: 35). Cixous imagines this as a feminine economy. The woman, who embodies the feminine economy more often than the masculine economy 'doesn't measure what she is giving [...] She gives cause to live, to think, to transform. That 'economy' can no longer be expressed as an economic term' (Cixous and Clément 1986: 100). A feminine economy, says Cixous, is 'the anti-Ulysses,' operating on a non-reciprocal generosity given 'without calculating, without hesitating, but believing, taking everything as far as it goes, giving

⁶⁴ As quoted in an Artnet article titled 'Marina Abramović Says Children Hold Back Female Artists' (25 July 2016) at <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/marina-abramovic-says-children-hold-back-female-artists-575150>

everything, renouncing all security- spending without a return,' which she equates with Ariadne (ibid: 75). Feminine generosity, as Lisa Guenther puts it, thus 'exceeds and disrupts' the circular give and take of the masculine economy (Guenther 2006: 54).

Cixous suggests that although in the feminine economy of open-ended giving a woman gives freely, she cannot give what she does not have (Cixous and Clément 1986: 100). What of her time? Is time something she has? Derrida says that 'to give time is to give nothing, nothing determinate, even if it is to give the giving of any possible giving, even if it gives the condition of giving.' (Derrida 1992: 54) He suggests that the 'difference between a gift and every other operation of pure and simple exchange is that the gift gives time' (ibid: 41). When a woman gives birth she is, as Guenther puts it, 'bring[ing] forth the time of the Other,' which is

not a simple transfer of existence from one subject to another; rather it gives rise to the Other to whom it will have given birth. The new-born child is not already present in such a way that she can "take" birth in the instant that it is given; rather, she comes to presence in and through the gift of birth.' (Guenther 2006: 53)

And here in the studio as I work with my son, what am I giving him? My time? My attention? I speak the letter I have written for him, live, for the first time. I am giving him my full attention: I am more than mother in this moment. He is surprised by the letter. It's a bit strange for him- maybe that I'm speaking so directly to him? I don't usually speak like this to him, at least not when we are sitting in chairs facing each other. At least not in an unfamiliar room, with a group of people listening in next door. It's an unfamiliar mix of the formal and intimate, for both of us. He is walking around. He is pulling faces. I am almost thrown off course by his response. What was I expecting? I want to say "come and sit down", but it's not in the script. So I gesture to him instead. He sits on my lap for a minute. I try a different approach and I speak into the space between us, rather than directly towards him. The words hang between us, and we both consider what I am saying. I let him take in those he wants, and leave the others in the room. Perhaps they will stay here for a future day when he needs to hear them again.

I leave the room and he begins his own work.

I am creating a space for him to be in his own time - to come into his own presence - to attend himself.

And at the same time, I enter my own time/space, which is stretched towards him still, and stretches back to when he was born, stretches to hear my voice tell the story of him being born, stretches to his younger self, to his brother, to the birth of his brother...

Pamphlet 3: *AfterBirth*

Please now read Pamphlet 3: *AfterBirth*

Meeting the Other in the Gap

As the logic of the active-passive at work in *désistance* makes apparent, the gap brought forth through various caesurae also points to the inner breaking of each person who is thinking [...] The reader/thinker is caught in the gap, actively engaged in passively receiving the other as the other gives yet, can never fully receive because of the gap that exists between the two. There is no way of reconciling this. (Crawford 2013: 74)

We try to appropriate the other in the gap. We objectify the other in order to know them: Merleau-Ponty's description of inhabitation. We risk losing ourselves to/in the other in this way. In her essay 'Bearing Witness', Amanda Stewart Fisher suggests that when we desire 'to comprehend the totality of the other [...] such a desire always effectively entails a reduction of the other to the bounds of self knowledge, effacing the other's radical exteriority' (Stewart Fisher 2009: 114). In her exploration of the responsibility of playwrights who seek to perform or mediate the testimony of the other, to those to whom the stories or testimonies belong, she suggests the playwright must engage in a process of bearing witness. This is 'the requirement that we – the listener – should open ourselves up to the unknowable and radical difference, the 'alterity' (Levinas) of the other' (ibid: 114). Listening, then, provides us with a means to open to the other, without reducing the other.

Luce Irigaray addresses the alterity of the other and acknowledges the relationship between language and the gap between 'the Two'⁶⁵ when she says: "'You who are not and will never be mine" are and remain *you*, since I cannot grasp you, understand you, possess you' (Irigaray 2001: 19). There is in the other a subjectivity that one cannot see or know, she says, and language is the path we take to go towards the other (ibid: 20). Language is a necessary mediation between us: it travels between the Two: I love *to* you, and not I love you (ibid: 19). Derrida takes this one step further to suggest that it is only in the gap between us (in the caesura between your tempo-rhythm and mine), and in the opening and welcoming performed in hospitality, that an encounter can take place (Crawford 2013: 78) The conditions for this demand *being-open* (this starts with listening), *attunement* (the thinker welcomes the fact that an/other may come, without actively looking for her), *the welcome* (to be passive to allow the other to come), and thus hospitality can begin (Crawford 2013: 76-78). Hospitality, for Derrida, 'welcomes the other without limit and stipulation through an unlimited opening of the self and the subsequent embrace of the other' (ibid: 78). The

⁶⁵ From the title of her book *To be Two* (2001)

host/receiver welcomes the guest in an event 'marked by interruption' in which 'the other is allowed to come as other and interrupt, disturb, and break systems open so that there is no possibility of closure' (ibid). Hospitality, in this sense, can be seen as a part of Cixous' feminine economy: it is based on disruption, excess and receptivity to the other.

The Performance

We exist in overlapping spaces or in physically separate spaces at various times. We move towards or away from each other in a mutual search for separate yet related selves. (Margaret Libby quoted in Liss 2013: 1)

The performance would take place on the eve of my eldest son's ninth birthday.

I write him a letter. I write *to* him.

I remember his birth *to* him.

I write as though he is listening to my voice speaking the words.

I write myself a letter too. I write *to* myself.

I am remembering *to* myself. As I was then. As I am now. And now.

There are two spaces: a performance studio and a side room.

The audience are invited into the large, darkened studio space. They sit in a small circle on chairs, facing inwards. They are looking in on a 'listening chamber': six white plinths, one with a sound board, the other 5 with an mp3 player on each. In between the plinths are 4 speakers. The fifth space is empty: there is a gap between the plinths.



One of the deals we made when we started working together was that Gwion wouldn't have to perform, at least that he wouldn't have to be in front of lots of people watching him. And above all, that he wouldn't have to speak. This was very important for him. As the audience enters, Gwion and I are in the side room. We cannot be seen there. However there is a microphone in there, which is connected to the PA in the studio. They can hear us. We whisper to each other and point towards the studio. Gwion tiptoes to the door to see if everyone has sat down. Then we sit down together, a microphone between us. I have already told him that I will be speaking a letter to him, but he hasn't heard it yet.

I wrote you a letter for your birthday.

This is what it says:

My beautiful Gwion,

I begin.



After speaking the letter to Gwion, I kiss him and walk in to the studio. The sound in there carries him with me. His task is to make 3 tracks using a loop station and a box of instruments and objects, which he would share with me once I'd finished.

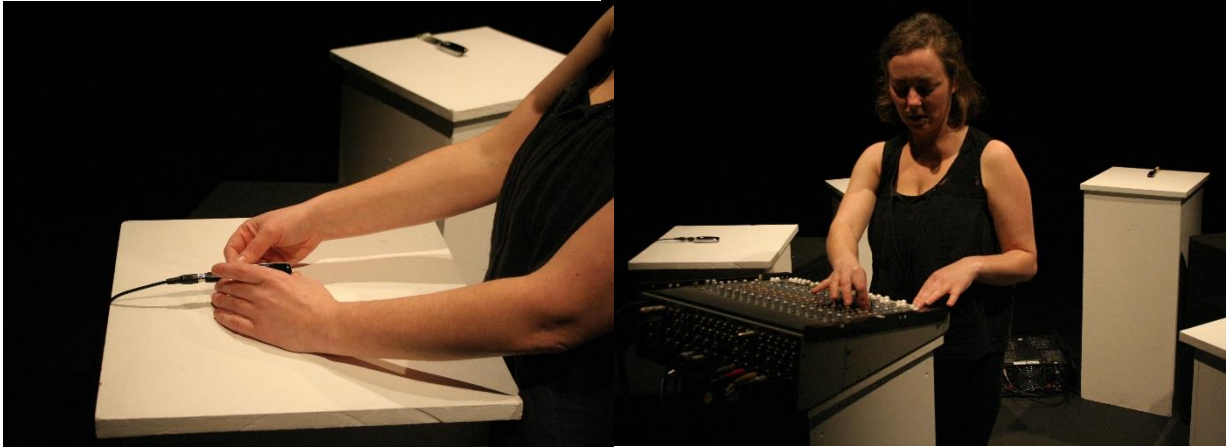


In the main studio space with the audience, I also create a live track. Instead of using instruments, however, I mix together a number of soundtracks which I have previously recorded, and which in some way are related to the birth stories. They are:

1. The soundtrack from the film I made as part of *twenty minutes* (2012).
2. A recording of the singing bowl I used in *caesura* (2013).
3. A montage of extracts from the recording of *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015).
4. A sound recording of the moment Oscar was born, and the first 9 minutes of his after-birth.⁶⁶
5. Two montages of sound clips of the boys' voices, sometimes mixed with mine.⁶⁷
6. A live feed of Gwion from the side room.

⁶⁶ Oscar had been 'written out' of performing in the final show. The decision was based on the fact he was still pre-linguistic and so any story-telling to/with him would have less meaning for him at this age. However, I wanted to include the sound of his birth. My cries as he emerges from my body are as much about my experience of his birth as they are about Gwion's birth. Both births are deeply intertwined within my body.

⁶⁷ The first was comprised of a sequence of short sound recordings Gwion had made on my phone from the ages of about five to seven. They included songs, nursery rhymes, stories he made up, and narrations of what he was doing (they were usually made in the car whilst we were driving). The second montage contained a sequence of sound clips of Oscar babbling and cooing, laughing with me, feeding, and also me singing to him whilst putting him to sleep.



Mixing my live track in the studio

Over the course of approximately 20 minutes, I played each track, layering them on top of each other, until all six could be heard. Working with the mixing desk, I faded them in and out to create a shifting soundtrack, which was recorded live. At the end of this, I had planned to play the track back to myself whilst I spoke the Letter to Self over it using a microphone. On the day, I couldn't get the final track to play back, so I spoke the letter with only the live feed of Gwion in the side room, in the background.



⁶⁸ An echo of Crawford (2013: 80).

Chapter 5: Maternal Performance

Maternal performance, as outlined previously, is a field of academic study in its infancy. Although concepts and theories of the maternal have been engaged with by visual artists for many years, it is only in the past few years that performance artists have begun to engage in articulating what the maternal might mean in the field. In their *Study Room Guide for Live Art and the Maternal* (2016) Emily Underwood-Lee and Lena Šimić outline some key questions which initiate this exploration:

- 'Can we talk about 'maternal performance aesthetics'? Is it useful? Are there any recurrent patterns in 'maternal performance aesthetics'?
- What is specific about motherhood being 'represented' through live art/performance? What are the recurrent themes in such re-presentations/re-enactments/re-figurations? How do the lived and the staged collide?
- What are the politics of 'maternal performance making', the politics of making work whilst at the same time looking after the children?
- What are the maternal artists' processes and methodologies? Are there any networks of support, specifically aimed at mother/artists working in the medium of live art/contemporary performance?'

(Underwood-Lee and Šimić 2016a: 5)

1 Maternal Aesthetics & Ethics

So, can we talk about 'maternal performance aesthetics'? And how do we qualify the term maternal in this context? We could certainly talk about art aesthetics that draw on the experience of motherhood/mothering, from Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* (1973-79) to Bobby Baker's *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988). These artists use their everyday lived experiences as mothers as the basis of their work. Objects from their roles of mothering appear: stained nappy liners, wool vests, crayons, messy foods, cleaning and cooking utensils. Their aesthetics integrate art and everyday life. As Bobby Baker explains:

I only intended to do this show once, really to make sense of the first eight years of motherhood before moving on. I felt very strongly that the importance of the mother's role, indeed parenting as a whole, was shockingly undervalued. I built on my experience of using my own true stories, blending this with a commentary on domesticity, motherhood and the role of the artist. I found a subtly subversive political voice that communicated my anger in a bearable way. (Barrett and Baker 2007: 49)

In their book *Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (2014), Yuedi and Carter suggest that the aesthetics of everyday life ‘rejects a narrow, art-centred methodology for aesthetics, and points to the continuities between aesthetic/artistic experience and everyday experience’ (Yuedi and Carter 2014: vii). For me, the choice to integrate the everyday became more necessary when I had a second child to look after. Mothering takes (my) time and energy. It asks me to prioritise the care of my child over everything else. Rather than choosing between my mothering and my performance-making, I chose both (at the same time). Similarly, Eve Dent describes making performances with her child as ‘a practical decision in order to facilitate the continuation of one’s own practice’ (Dent & Gingell in Underwood-Lee & Simic 2016: 32). Clare Qualmann describes how her practice changed after having a baby, in order to incorporate the baby, so that she didn’t have to say ‘no’ to opportunities:

In 2012, when my son was a few months old, I was invited to make a walk for a project at Lewisham Art House. Initially I ruled this out. My practice before would have required multiple research trips, extensive walking in the area. This now felt entirely unfeasible. Instead of saying no I decided to try to make a piece that would be possible to do with my baby in tow.

(Qualmann in *ibid*: 14)

An autobiographical practice made this easier for me again as I could work from my lived circumstances/given world at that time: making art in this way allows the various parts of my life to become more integrated rather than competing for my attention. What are the ethical implications of this approach to performance-making? In *Breastcups* (2011) Dent breastfeeds her daughter in public. As the baby feeds from one nipple, the other is attached to a ‘milking-machine’ which collects breastmilk. This is put into little milk jugs, which performance partner Zoe Gingell hands out to the audience with fresh tea. The entire performance is structured around the child’s needs: it can only happen when/if she wants to feed.

Performance becomes something the mother-artist produces for the audience, which they lap up. By positioning the audience as the milk-consumers, Dent and Gingell are problematizing the ethical relationship between performer and audience: serving the audience is secondary to attending to the baby’s needs. The live collaboration between mother and baby creates the tension, as Dent puts it ‘inclusion of my child added a level of the unexpected and moment to moment creation/adaptation’ (Dent in *ibid*: 32).

Within each of the three performances in this project, I performed a very different relationship to my sons. In *caesura* (2013) my son was not present, which by default, meant that I was absent from him. For every parent who performs/works without their child, this is

the cultural norm. Having no children present with me means I have more control over the live event: the adult-audience usually do what I ask them to. Performance/work for the mother who leaves her child at home can be a place of respite and silence; calmness and stillness. In this space she can be for her other non-mother selves. *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015) was made during my second pregnancy, and needed to be performed by a certain date/month in order for it to be physically possible for me to do it. The pressure I put on myself to bring this performance about took a big toll on me physically. My older son spent many hours in the studio working with me to help me carry things that were getting too difficult for me. I tried to work on my own as though I were not pregnant: I did not make any concessions for my ever-expanding body. This was most evident when on the morning of the second performance (at another university), there was no one to help me prepare. Not only was there no technician to help with the get-in, but the Saturday-morning porters could not move themselves from their desks to look for a trolley for me. So despite being over seven months pregnant and with only an upright chair trolley to hand, I spent over an hour unloading 5 plinths, 1 wooden box, a TV, a projector, a vision mixer, a screen, 2 cameras, 2 tripods, and all the small items I used in the performance.

AfterBirth (2016) was made during the post-partum period, and performed when my baby was 10 months old. Everything revolved at first around the baby's needs: I did most of my thinking and writing while I was feeding him; I rehearsed in short 2-3 hour blocks when I could be away from him; the initial design put him literally at the centre. Once again I started with loads of 'stuff' and with a small baby now to add to the list, we loaded and unloaded the car on a regular basis. In the final piece, the design concept came as a result of the wishes of my older son: he didn't want to be watched, didn't want to say anything, didn't want to feel under pressure. Through a very rigorous consideration of the ways in which I would perform the mother, I ended up with no mother-stuff in the main performance space: 5 mp3 players, a mixing desk, an edirol, the plinths again and 4 speakers. This time I made sure I had arranged for help. In contrast to the ordered performance space, the side room was messier with instruments and objects spread over a table and floor. This space needed to be comfortable for Gwion to 'play' in. There is a correlation between messiness and play.

As the performer-researcher-mother my task, as I saw it, was to find creative solutions to ensure that the needs of my children were met, whilst at the same time creating performances that responded to my research questions that were also satisfying to my artist-self. I felt like I

could compromise more easily in the latter areas; or that I could adapt other aspects of the project in order to fit around my demands as a mother. Although the research-self had a set of questions to explore, the *ways* I answered them was flexible. The artist-self had to be the most adaptable (or creative). Collaborating with a baby was easier in some respects, as his needs were more predictable: on a ‘good’ day he would have a particular feeding and sleeping pattern. On the other hand, I felt I had to regularly motivate my older son to stay involved in the project. Although I would have done this if he had been involved in any project, I would not expect to have to do this for a collaborator who wasn’t my child. Toni Morrison explains this as ‘the demands that children make are not the demands of a normal ‘other’ (quoted in Baraitser 2009: 8). As a result, says Baraitser, the child ‘draws a different kind of “her” out of her’ (ibid).

In ‘Stabat Mater’ Kristeva explores the ethics of the relationship between mother and child, using the term ‘herethics’ to suggest the mother is at once ethical, heretical and feminine (Kristeva 1985: 152). Baraitser describes this an ethics ‘in which the mother sees herself as responsible for the other’s life to the point of her own disappearance, which places her outside the law of the symbolic’ (Baraitser 2009: 16). My experience of working with my child/ren was not like this because I couldn’t disappear in totality: my will may have had to disappear at times (and I can experience this as a little-death); my artist-self may have had to step back at times, but she didn’t disappear, and in fact she had to develop a strong resilience to survive/thrive. What emerged through the life of the project was a sewing together of aesthetics and ethics: an attempt to integrate my artistic/research selves with my mother self, which resulted in a performance aesthetic that had to engage with everyday (maternal) aesthetics. In this closing chapter, I would like to focus on specific aesthetics that emerged relating to maternal time within both my practice, performances and birth stories, including a consideration of interruptions and the eruption of the somatic in the gap that is created.

2 Maternal Time

we break the mesh of time and space
in the vortex closing and opening
(Clews 1990: 97)

Maternal time, in medical terminology, refers to the time a mother spends with her baby/child. In economic research, the amount of time a mother ‘invests’ in early childhood is

measured against ‘early child outcomes’ such as cognitive skill development (del Bono *et al* 2015). We could trace a long thread through psychoanalysis to discover how the mother/child relationship/separation forms a vital part in the development of the child’s psyche. But, taken from a feminist phenomenological perspective, what could maternal time come to signify? How does the mother experience herself in this time, for example? In writing about her project *Contemplation Time* (2007-2008) during a period of maternity leave, performance artist Lena Šimić juxtaposes the orderliness of her art practice (‘Writing my journal, walking in the park, taking photographs and sitting on the bench’) with ‘the daily messiness of mothering labour.’⁶⁹ Through her art practice she can bring order to the messiness. In this way, Šimić is interested in ‘draw[ing] attention to some of the small acts in life, ritual-like repetitious actions, which form the backbone’ of her art making processes.⁷⁰ Šimić developed this practice in, what she describes as ‘maternal time’ during her subsequent maternity leave in a blog called *Friday Records: A Document of Maternity Leave* (2014),⁷¹ and then again in 2016 in a version ‘with/out James.’⁷² During her leave period she wrote a blog every week, which reflected on her time with baby James. The narrative is non-linear, repetitive, cyclical. The rhythm moves from slow meandering, to pacy staccato. Through the breaking(s), continuity appears in the landscape: ‘In the end I found my familiar site. Sense of continuity. Occassionally [sic] we are here at this row of benches’ (Twenty Six Weeks).⁷³ The work performs the interruptions of this mother’s day/thinking: daily walks with the baby are interspersed with to-do lists, details of social meetings, worries and concerns, alongside football scores.

Maternal time, for Šimić, is all-consuming and her regular blog entries serve to mark time, for fear of being lost to/in it: ‘I can’t contain myself. It might be best to live off the waves of emotions, get swept away by it all’ (Thirty Six Weeks).⁷⁴ Her exhaustion grows. By week fifty one, her writing is suffering: ‘I never wrote yesterday. I’m running out of steam.’⁷⁵ And by her final week, week fifty two, she declares:

I hardly manage anything and the less you do the less you manage. Now, when all is quiet, I should say/write something profound, but everything escapes me. My head is empty and I’m itching to get on with daily tasks of tidying up, making lists, thinking

⁶⁹ <https://lenasimic.org/maternal-matters/contemplation-time/>

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ <https://lenasimic.org/maternal-matters/friday-records/>

⁷² *ibid*

⁷³ <https://fridayrecords.wordpress.com/twenty-six-weeks-2/>

⁷⁴ <https://fridayrecords.wordpress.com/thirty-six-weeks/>

⁷⁵ <https://fridayrecords.wordpress.com/fifty-one-weeks/>

what needs to be done in order for the day to go smoothly and how not to get depressed. I managed to vacuum clean the whole house today, with James. What an achievement! And being in a clean house makes me feel so happy. I need to go...⁷⁶

At the core of my research project lies an exploration of narrative, which of course is fundamentally about time: how we order it and give it meaning. According to the masculinist paradigm time is linear, progressive, questing and outcome-focused. Here, time wants action, results. In contrast, in a feminist paradigm, as embodied in my three performances, time is never linear: it is full of ruptures - the other is always breaking in, or through: *other* people, *other* beings, including the environment as *other*: the studio, the technology, the lights, the temperature. Instead of resisting this other, we can choose to welcome it. As Derrida describes, this involves us *stopping* in order to wait for the other to arrive. This stopping, this welcoming means that we are allowing ourselves to be open to being disturbed, and that we let go of any preconceived outcomes. Live Art and Performance Art often invite this type of engagement.

In *caesura* (2013), the six-hour durational performance involved me sitting still for that length of time, interrupted only by the arrival of others, which in turn triggered a series of choreographed and rehearsed gestures from me. If no-one came, there would have been no movement, and less 'noise' for me to hear. The audience's coming and going marked the passing of time. My actions marked the passing of our time together. Each thread on my dress became a trace of this passing. If no-one had come, how long would I have waited? Although the structure of the performance was based on the premise that 15 people had agreed to attend, there were other elements of the performance which meant stopping what I had planned: the gel on one of the lights melted – I could feel the heat – I had to lift my blindfold to check it and let my assistant know so that she could turn the now-white light off ... the wind was howling – I had anticipated silence – but the old building rattled around me. As one woman walked into the labyrinth there was a loud bang. Once more, I had to lift my blindfold to check everything was ok. She hadn't seemed to notice the bang, or me looking. Working with technology always puts the performer at risk of interruptions. When you have planned something specific and rehearsed, it is incredibly frustrating when/if it doesn't work in the live event. *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015) and *AfterBirth* (2016) both used sound in

⁷⁶ <https://fridayrecords.wordpress.com/fifty-two-weeks/>

order to mark time through building/composing a live soundtrack. In both performances something did not go according to plan, opening up new experiences – gifts?

It would be too simplistic to suggest that an open-ended performance structure could be described as feminine and a closed structure as masculine, and yet the way that time is embodied and performed within aesthetic performance is linked to representation. As part of a Study Room in Exile event with mother/artists, Underwood-Lee and Šimić ask: ‘Is it possible to escape representation through durational performance?’ And ‘Can subjective experience of performance in the performer’s body escape representation (in/through exhaustion)’? (Underwood-Lee and Šimić 2016b). Perhaps it is only in durational performance that a performer is able to move beyond representation because the body’s limits are challenged. Therefore the performer moves beyond their ordinary/daily levels of self-control. Are we more interested in witnessing the body in extreme duress rather than at ease? To what extent does a culture of masculine time (linear, progressive, outcome-focused) influence performance aesthetics?

As outlined previously, maternal time is inevitably connected with transformation and becoming, and the links with temporality and liveness in performance are clear. To what extent can performance rewrite history/ies? Within midwifery studies, Thomson and Downe have explored this in their project ‘Changing the Future to Change the Past’ (2010) in a study that considered women’s experiences of a positive birth following a traumatic birth experience, and the healing effects of this experience. Their four key themes arising from this were: resolving the past and preparing for the unknown; being connected; being redeemed and being transformed. A redemptive birth meant that women could ‘lay the ghosts to rest’ of their former ordeal (Thomson and Downe 2010: 107) whilst preparing themselves for their future birth through embracing uncertainty (ibid: 109). In her book *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (1992), anthropologist Robbie Davis-Floyd, similarly says:

the process of reinterpretation through which those women who were traumatized by their birth experiences - whose belief systems, in other words, were overthrown through the consistent application of obstetrical procedures to their labour and birth processes - seek to rewrite the messages sent to them by hospital rituals through narrative, through childbirth activism, and through subsequent births. (Davis-Floyd 1992: 306)

Making performances has been my form of birth activism: by re-writing the narratives over and over I have brought about real changes in my life. Engaging in an aesthetic performance

practice has had lasting and meaningful impact on my sense of identity and wider feeling of wellbeing. This process has been consistently generative, surprising and unexpected, all key elements of Baraitser's maternal ethics (Baraitser 2009: 6).

The Surprising Truth

‘Break out of the circles (...) Take a look around, then cut through!’
(Cixous 1976: 892)

Andrea Liss describes the ‘surprise of the real’ as a key maternal aesthetic, basing her description on Lacan's notion of the Real, which she describes as ‘the psychoanalytic trauma and difficult threshold between the mother and child from which the child emerges from the mother into the world of language and cultural order’ (Liss 2013). Lacan's Real is the pre-linguistic state of unity, and therefore cannot be expressed in language. It is represented as a state of fullness or completeness (for the neo-natal child), and which becomes traumatic for us as adults as it erupts whenever we have to face the materiality of our existence.⁷⁷ For Liss the Real has possibilities beyond the traumatic in motherhood and it emerges as:

the deepest joys, the most ecstatic abandon, the least complicated erotic, the most unimaginable love affair. The most sublime, wordless understandings. The unimaginable misunderstandings, frustrations, the testing of limits, the facing one's own fears. The facing of the self. The irrevocable. The moving forward because there is no choice. The forgiveness. The softest of caresses. The hope beyond hope. (ibid)

sublime, wordless understandings
facing one's own fears
facing of the self
the forgiveness
the hope

Each of the three performances in this research project tells part of a story. Combined, they do not tell the full story because there is no single story to be told. Each performance is a doorway at which I stand, listening quietly to the sounds, words and gestures coming from the other side. What I hear carries more weight, more meaning for me than for the audience. The content of the narrative, therefore, is not what I want to draw their attention to. Instead,

⁷⁷ See Lacan's Structure of the Psyche
<https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/lacanstructure.html>

what I am pointing towards is the possibility of a feminine narrative structure. This structure is not closed, but filled with gaps, through which parts leak out and are also admitted. What I am performing is the listening body, and specifically the excessive maternal listening body. The listening body requires a process of softening and opening; the maternal body invites surrender, care, forgiveness and love. I become receptive to moments in which I might become more cognizant of myself as mother, as Andrea Liss puts it, ‘when sense of self and sense of self with child(ren) brings about new subjectivities and inter-subjectivities.’⁷⁸ In this place of listening, something always happens, arrives, is born in my body, *soma*: I usually notice it happening, if not in the moment, then later. The first time I experienced this was in *twenty minutes* (2012):

I remember in the days and weeks that followed the performance feeling like something had moved from my heart - a block that had just been sitting on my diaphragm. It had been making my breathing difficult. Although I was sometimes aware how my breathing was strained, I had never given much thought to anything that might have been causing this. And had never considered it might be something that could be released. But now it’s gone. I remember speaking with a friend and describing it as “something opened up in me. I remember exactly when it happened: as I began to turn slowly round in the spotlight.” (Evans 2012: 31)

sublime, wordless understandings

In *caesura* (2013), my awareness of my embodiment developed over a longer period of time: I sat in a very cold space for six hours, moving very little. There was no emphatic ‘moment’ of surprise. In fact, the moment of surprise or shock came two years later when I realised that throughout the period of making and performing this piece I hadn’t ever considered the role of my child in relation to it. He was always separate, reminiscent of the separation I still felt within myself. When I made it I wasn’t thinking of myself as mother-in-relation-to-child, but as woman who had been ripped away from who she (thought she) was. I described it later in *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015):

|| Not contracting, || but

Expanding. ||

Opening- ||

To all that- ||

⁷⁸ Andrea Liss used this as guest curator, as part of her call for submissions for an edition of the online journal produced by MaMSIE. See <http://mamsie.org/2011/07/call-for-submissions-maternal-aesthetics-the-surprise-of-the-real/>

Thighs- ||
Heart- ||
Womb- ||
Softening
Breaking open. ||
Tearing me in the places that hold fast. ||
Wrenching me from all I thought I knew.
|| Didn't know myself.
|| Couldn't hear myself.

facing one's own fears
facing of the self

It was through the performing of *caesura* (2012) that I wrote a new story for myself. The repeated arrival of the other/audience member kept reminding me that I was not separate, was not lost anymore. This growing understanding of my own maternal identity informed the performances that came afterwards. Both of them included one of my sons. *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015) was made and performed when I was pregnant with my second son Oscar, and the sound of his heart beat is featured within the soundscape. I performed it twice in different settings and my experience was also completely different. The first moment during the live event which caught me by surprise, was how moved I felt when I was recording the baby's heartbeat at the end. It felt like a symbolic placement of a sound-thread on top of a tapestry that was already intricately woven from other experiences. I was able to hear the integration of all of these threads for the first time. In contrast, the moment of surprise in the second performance occurred when I spoke the words:

Being || worn away ||

|| Washed away ||

||Borne away. ||

Being moved ||

Resist ||

Being moved ||

Give way.

|| Giving myself away ||

Letting go ||

Going...||

Going...||

Gone. ||

I had spent a full morning getting the space set up, mostly on my own, heavily pregnant. This was not what I had been expecting. On top of this, the technician informed me that morning that he would not be available to tech the show – another unexpected hiatus! In the end, my husband and son (then, aged eight) stepped in to operate the sound and lights at the last minute. Without any time to run through the cues, I started that performance twenty minutes late. I discovered ten minutes in that the loop station wasn't working. I couldn't fix it, so I carried on without the all-important envelope of sound. I carried out actions that were meant to leave traces in the soundscape, but instead left nothing. I was tense and frustrated, certainly not soft and receptive. This wasn't what I had planned.

We write our story before it begins.

We write it as we dream it to be.

We write it as we think it should be.

We write believing we can know what will happen.

When I spoke the words about letting go, that very real experience I was having reared its head and made itself heard in my body. Upon hearing it, I let go. I let go of the expectation. I let go of the frustration. I let go of the control and let the experience bear me along.

the forgiveness

the hope

These moments of surprise manifest in different ways within my body, sometimes as a flood of emotion or tears, sometimes as a noticeable change in temperature. In these performances I was not attempting to represent ‘surprise’, but to present it, or more accurately to become present to the possibility of noticing it on a somatic level. It is inherently risky, because there is no guarantee I will experience any surprise. And even if I do, the moment can be so subtle and fleeting that an audience may not register it, or in other cases they may misread it:

“Was the baby kicking at the end, when you sat up” she asked, “I thought I could see your body moving as though the baby was kicking.” I was crying. My body was sobbing. The baby was still. I just smiled at her, keeping that moment for myself.

(Feedback from *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2015))

What have these *arrivances* to do with truth? As discussed in Chapter 3, telling *the* truth is an impossible feat, we can only ever tell our own/a truth. In *rootprints* (1997) Hélène Cixous is concerned not so much with the real as she is with the truth and the roots of it (although there are some similarities to Lacan’s Real in the way she describes it):

What is most true is poetic because it is not stopped-stoppable. All that is stopped, grasped, all that is subjugated, easily transmitted, easily picked up, all that comes under the word concept, which is to say all that is taken, caged, is *less* true. (Cixous 1997: 4)

In her notes, Cixous searches for a beginning before the beginning: the root of the thing itself: ‘What happens: events interiors, snatch/ them from the cradle, from the source. /I want to watch watching arrive. / I want to watch arrivance. I want to/ find the root of needing to eat. And/ taste it: work of sweat/ sleep’ (ibid). This, ‘naked life,’ is what is most true, for her, and this truth is always poetic (ibid: 3). Instead of thinking of the ‘surprise of the real’ as a (maternal) aesthetic within my work, I would like to re-frame this as ‘surprise of the truth’: performance as a work of sweat and dreams, in which the performer searches for the root of (her) living, unpeeling her world so that she/it (the world) may reveal her/itself. She bares her skin, and writes the world nude. By exploring her experience of becoming a mother, she dives into the beginnings, his and hers. She throws the cradle out in her thirst for truth. The words spill her way.

(in)conclusion

Instead of defining a category of maternal poetics, let us remind ourselves why there is a need for the voices of mothers to be written, spoken and heard:

since Oedipal narratives silence the voices of mothers, we must listen for maternal stories in postmodern plots where selfhood is constructed, or reconstructed, in more complex patterns. (Daly & Reddy 1991: 12)

Through the course of this thesis I have worked to reveal how these stories might be constructed through aesthetic performance and writing (academic as well as poetic), which ‘involves relationality since it constitutes participation in a particular culture’ (Jeremiah 2006: 29). By tracing the intricate inter-relationship(s) between speaking and listening, rhythm and caesura, and acknowledging that the experience of writing and reading ‘promote non-hierarchical, fluid sets of identifications’ (ibid), I have engaged in a (complex) aesthetic performativity.

I have constructed and performed my own (maternal) subjectivity. Through my autobiographical performance I have sought to incorporate the lived experience within the term subject, as it is through the body we are subjected. Following Cavarero, as a maternal subject I am a unique existent and I write myself and am written through my body. I have explored the role of listening in my writing/speaking as what refers me to myself (Nancy), making any possibility of self immediately plural and relational. Through the experience of giving birth, a woman (or more specifically a female-sexed body) moves from a state of pregnant subjectivity to becoming a mother. This transition-state has its own time marked by effort (labour) and excessiveness (becoming two bodies). The physical experience of giving birth can be a threshold for constructing a new sense of self in the world, which is relational, mutual, multi-dimensional and connected. This involves stretching, tearing, ripping, cutting (oneself) open to bring the other to life (Cixous). These processes of transformation informed my performance enquiries as well as the creative writing in the pamphlets.

Because there is never a singular, homogenous birth experience, describing the associated sense-of-self is very challenging and risks becoming essentialised outside of an ethnographic study. Moved by a need to emphasise the importance of finding ways to speak the embodied experience rather than the culturally-prescribed, linear narratives that are cleaner, happier,

more contained and more ordered, I have used modes of autobiographical performance practice to do this. I have explored language, narrative, metaphor, rhythm and typography in writing the performances, the pamphlets and this thesis. In response to my own traumatic experience of giving birth I have also sought to re-write trauma as a 'productive force' (Baraitser 2009: 76) in an attempt to move away from the abject narrative that threatens to engulf me. Using trauma theory, I have formulated a description of the performer as witness, which then shifts the relationship with her audience, who become fellow witnesses. This process requires a practice in deep listening, which allows the performer to engage all aspects of herself in an integral performance. From this embodied place, I have explored the possibilities of the rupture as providing an opportunity for a deeper engagement with the somatic, so that a (personal, subjective) truth might be sensed/noticed. Throughout this process I have become aware of a yearning for the maternal within me, beyond the role function Cixous names it the source of goods. It is a search for origins, which I discover as I write/birth myself anew through each performance.

I have sewed together concepts and experiences of maternal and birthing subjectivities through performance and writing in a way that has not been done before in an academic context, but will add a voice to the developing conversations on these subjects. I have argued that instead of thinking about these subjectivities as a split of sorts, we can think about them in terms of stretching. Like the pregnant woman's belly, womb, cervix and vagina that stretch to hold and birth the foetus within, I have suggested that we think of maternal attention, too, in terms of stretching from her (mother) to him (child). I connect (and practice) stretching my attention within/from my mother-performer's body. Whilst the mother has the choice to decide at any one time where she wants to place her attention, and therefore her responsibility, she can and must attend to herself in order to be able to attend to her child (Irigaray, Baraitser), which gives rise to a feminist ethics.



Beyond the personal autobiography

There were a number of times within my research project when I considered working with other women to find ways to tell their stories. Ultimately, the reason for working on an autobiographical practice was twofold: firstly, I felt I needed to go through the process of connecting more deeply with my own embodied experience of birth through the performance-making process in order to discover new ways of telling my story/ies. Having undertaken this journey, I now feel more prepared to create a space to support other women in their own explorations and more confident as a performance maker to be able to support another woman's creative process. I would like to find ways to work with other women on a birth stories project in the future and currently I have a number of potential projects lined up,

including a creative talking circle for pregnant women and a community-based project with new mothers in south Wales.

The second reason for taking the autobiographical path was because it was quicker and easier than having to negotiate the formal ethics procedure in the university. Each year when I began my performance-making process I sat with my supervisors and we looked at my enquiry and asked if I could achieve this by working on my own. Each time we agreed that I could. In my first-year ethics research seminar we were told to think of the ethics process under one central question: ‘Will this person/these people be worse off having taken part in this research?’ What are the risks involved working with women who may have had traumatic birth experiences and what skills does an artist need to have to support this type of emotional work? These were key questions raised in a conversation I had with Professor Billie Hunter, Royal College of Midwives Professor of Midwifery, Cardiff University in my first year. She thought that if I worked with women I would need to undertake a psychological screening process using a tool such as the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) to ensure that participants’ mental health was sound enough.⁷⁹ Again, in my first year this felt outside my area of expertise and I was reluctant to spend a lot of time learning how to use it when I needed to focus on my own practice. Ironically, I am now employed as Manager for an Arts and Mental Health charity and we use the WEMWBS for all new referrals who access our service because we are funded by the local health board.

Researchers and artists have explored the efficacy of this measurement tool in the University of Derby’s *The Birth Project*. Funded by AHRC and led by Professor Susan Hogan, the project sought to ‘use the arts to interrogate birth discourses, to challenge embedded assumptions, and in this process, to stimulate mutual recovery between all those who experience and are affected by birth’ (Hogan 2016: 3). The project asked:

- What role might arts engagement have to play in ante-natal and post-natal care?
- To what extent are hospital practices, that are iatrogenic in nature, implicated in post-natal distress?

⁷⁹ The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale was developed ‘to enable the monitoring of mental wellbeing in the general population and the evaluation of projects, programmes and policies which aim to improve mental wellbeing. WEMWBS is a 14 item scale with 5 response categories, summed to provide a single score ranging from 14-70. The items are all worded positively and cover both feeling and functioning aspects of mental wellbeing’ (<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/research/platform/wemwbs/>).

- To what extent is ‘mutual recovery’ possible through engagement with the arts, and if so, to establish what form this may take?
- What, in particular, does an arts-based approach offer in exploring birth experiences and the transition to motherhood?

(ibid)

Within their methods, however, there was a differentiation between women who made art working with a fine artist and leading to an exhibition, and women who engaged in a ‘more intensive and therapeutic way with self-acknowledged unresolved birth issues’ through art elicitation, working with an art therapist (ibid: 4). In both sets of workshops 37% of participants had an increase in their wellbeing according to the WEMWBS, as well as a reduction in their experience of social isolation. This is a measuring tool that I can consider in future participatory projects, which could draw comparable results with this and other arts and health projects. The ethical issue I will need to respond to is whether I can work with women who have unresolved birth issues without being a therapist in a university setting, or whether this is something that is best explored in a community or arts setting, where the ethical constraints are different.

As part of *The Birth Project*, performance was used as a way of responding to the research findings rather than as a research method. *Labour Intensive* (2015), which was later reworked as *Partus* (2016), was made by Third Angel based on the findings along with interviews carried out ‘to solicit birth stories’ (ibid: 8). The company describe the piece as:

Birth. It’s a massive life or death thing that happens every minute of every day in every country of the world.

The expectations, the exhaustion, the euphoria. The shock, the sadness, the stupidly long shifts. The joy, the pain, the mess. Oh, and that first cup of tea that tasted better than anything, ever. Third Angel delves into the myths, the statistics and the politics of birth, engaging with real people and real stories.

(as cited in ibid)

As part of my research I could not find a participatory performance project that explored women’s experience of birth in a research setting, which highlights a need for more work like this. Meanwhile, there have been a range of performance projects in theatre settings that explore the theme of birth in different ways. These include midwifery- and health-led initiatives and collaborations such as B!RTH (2016), a creative partnership between the Centre for Maternal and Newborn Health at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and

the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester that uses a series of plays and panel discussions ‘to raise awareness, change policy and provoke debate around the vast inequality in maternal and newborn health across the world.’⁸⁰ *Partus* (2015) was a collaboration between Wales-based visual artist Ruth Jones and electronic composer Andy Wheddon that takes as a starting point a CTG scan of a medicalised labour and birth. The sound piece weaves electronic music with two live female voices and according to Jones it ‘reinterprets and enacts the trace as sound, mediating between mourning the medical-technological intervention in labour and reclaiming the human experience.’⁸¹

Within the visual arts field there have been a range of recent projects that celebrate and enquire into the experience of birth, motherhood and creativity including *The Procreate Project*, who were responsible for the *Oxytocin Festival* at the Royal College of Art (2017) and run a variety of projects to support women in their creative lives throughout pregnancy and motherhood.⁸² Similarly, *Mothers who Make* is a growing national network of mothers who are artists, established by theatre maker Matilda Leyser in 2014.⁸³ Artist Helen Sargeant curated an online, interdisciplinary, collaborative arts project in 2013-14 called *The egg, the womb, the head and the moon*. The project ran for 42 weeks. Each week she published a blog post from a different artist that engaged with the maternal through a range of creative forms. It culminated in a physical exhibition in Hebden Bridge in May 2014.⁸⁴ The Birth Rites Collection, which began in Manchester is ‘the first and only collection of contemporary artwork dedicated to the subject of childbirth’ curated by Helen Knowles and is now housed at the Department of Midwifery, Kings College, London.⁸⁵

As an arts programmer I am very interested in thinking about who are the audiences for these projects and events. I would like to find ways to perform the work made within my research project in other settings and I am in conversation with venues and universities in Wales at this time to explore future possibilities. Since finishing this project, I have made a further performance called *CORD* (2016) with support from Arts Council of Wales, which features a recorded soundtrack of my second son being born and further explores the role of deep

⁸⁰ See <https://www.birthdebate.com/>

⁸¹ See http://www.holyhiatus.co.uk/?page_id=98

⁸² See <http://www.procreateproject.com/>

⁸³ See <http://www.improbable.co.uk/motherswhomake/>

⁸⁴ See <http://www.eggwombheadmoon.com/about/>

⁸⁵ See <http://birthritescollection.org.uk/>

listening in performance along with themes of hospitality and encounter. Yet there are challenges. Although the work was supported on an artistic level by ACW, venue programmers are more reluctant to programme it. They are unsure of who the audiences might be. Some have concerns about how the work might affect members of staff whose own experiences of maternity are sensitive. I am left with the question of where does work like this belong? And who does it speak to?

In June 2017 I attended the Culture, Health and Wellbeing international conference in Bristol, organised by Arts and Health South West.⁸⁶ I attended a panel on Trauma and the Arts, which was chaired by Fred Foote, a U.S. medical doctor, veteran and poet who has spent many years creating holistic medicine programmes at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Bethesda, MD. His advice to artists, arts managers and medical staff present was to start projects without being afraid. All we needed, he said, was a Mental Health First Aid certificate (which is usually a 2-day training course) and a group of people who want to engage in the arts. According to Foote, being involved in the arts has a major transformative potential for people who have experienced oftentimes severe trauma. This was followed by a paper from Alison O'Connor, co-director of Re-Live, a Wales-based theatre company who has begun to work with veterans in Cardiff. Like Foote, she described her practice as something that was developing through working with the participants. Through careful attention and ongoing reflection, the company were able to respond to the needs of participants as they arose rather than pre-empting what these might be. This seems to me to be a very honest, person-centred way of working that allows the artists to listen to each individual who they work with, rather than assuming they will present certain issues because of their past experiences.

At the beginning of this thesis, I outlined that around a third of women experience trauma during birth. I only became aware of this because I had experienced it myself. I only became aware of this because I made a performance to explore my birth experience more deeply. What might change if all these women were told what trauma is, how it plays out in the body and that it can be released? What might change if all these women were supported to release this trauma if they wanted to? I don't want to end this thesis on a generalisation about the

⁸⁶ See <https://www.culturehealthwellbeing.org.uk/>

ways that medical institutions continue to keep women in silence, pain and fear by withholding this information because I want to find ways to change this. I believe that performance-making is a valuable and effective approach for women to reclaim their own birth experiences and that through an autobiographical performance process women can regain agency over their own bodies on both a somatic level and on a level of narrative.



CORD (2016). Photo by Peter Morgan.

So come now -
As you are.
Interrupt and disturb me
Break everything open
So that there is no possibility of closure.⁸⁷

I will wait for you here,
Ready to embrace you when you come.

⁸⁷ Crawford (2013: 80)

Pamphlet Endnotes

caesura

After the experience of performing *caesura* (2013), I wanted to articulate the new understandings I had in relation to the way I had experienced time and waiting within pregnancy, labour, post-partum, as well as the durational aspect of the performance itself. In the pamphlet I use Hélène Cixous' essay 'What is it o'clock? Or The Door (we never enter)' (Cixous 1998) to generate a structure in which to place the poems. I intimate myself into her essay as a narrator, or storyteller. I tell the story of my story through the frame of her story.

ENDNOTES

¹ Audience (1) feedback

² Audience (2) feedback. This person's feedback continues on the next pages.

³ Audience (3) feedback. This person's feedback continues on the next pages.

⁴ Cixous (1998: 61)

⁵ Cixous (ibid: 72)

⁶ Term coined by Cixous (ibid)

⁷ This is a reference to how Cixous writes about the process of grief: 'First the earth. Later the waters that I lose' (ibid: 72)

⁸ Cixous (ibid: 70)

⁹ This is a reference to Cixous' description of the body who avoids feeling pain. She says 'the thing was happening beyond, over there, and beyond in the very depths of me, where, like someone who is afraid of feeling a lot of pain doesn't move at all, I didn't move a thought, I didn't move my soul, I petrified myself, I knew what was waiting for me, I wasn't living this time, I didn't live it...I let it happen' (ibid:72)

¹⁰ Cixous (ibid:71)

¹¹ Cixous makes a reference to a piece of writing from Clarice Lispector (ibid:75)

¹² Cixous (ibid)

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ Cixous writes 'The mother who loves like she breathes, loves and doesn't know / it's the incarnation of a yes' (ibid:75)

AfterBirth

ENDNOTES

¹ In Irish mythology Oscar was one of the greatest Irish warriors in the Fianna. This song was written in the Fenian Lay form, which were originally composed to document the lives of heroes. See Shields (2008).

² Ten- is the PIE root of tender.

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