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How to Cite: Johnson, C. 2019. Maternal Art and Post-Natal Wellbeing: Proximity and Separation in Lena Simic's *Contemplation Time* (2007–8) and Eti Wade's *Jocasta* (2008). *Studies in the Maternal*, 11(1): 1, pp. 1–23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.263>

Published: 05 November 2019

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Studies in the Maternal*, which is a journal published by the *Open Library of Humanities*.

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ARTICLE

Maternal Art and Post-Natal Wellbeing: Proximity and Separation in Lena Simic's *Contemplation Time* (2007–8) and Eti Wade's *Jocasta* (2008)

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This article discusses two photographic artworks that challenge popular narratives of failed or achieved maternal femininity. My readings of Lena Simic's *Contemplation Time: a document of maternity leave* (2007–8) and Eti Wade's *Jocasta* (2008) are informed by interviews with six women in their first year of motherhood. I am interested in the ways in which these artworks articulate complex maternal relations and their potential to be used to increase the wellbeing of first-time mothers. The article includes discussion of the research method and proposes 'empathic affirmation' as an extension to previous work on interviewing mothers. An overriding concern has been to write the embodied experience of mothers back into readings of artworks that speak in their name. With this in mind the responses of my participants provide the backbone to my analysis of the artworks and why they matter to discourses of maternal subjectivity.

In September 2017 British singer and song writer Paloma Faith appeared on the Jonathan Ross television show, having returned to work after the birth of her first child nine months earlier. She spoke candidly about the difficulties of the birth and the first few weeks and months of motherhood. Her comments focussed on the difference between her expectations of being a 'perfect Earth Mother', using hypnobirthing techniques and having a drug-free birth, and the reality of the lived experience, which involved 20 hours of labour, an emergency C-section and a premature baby. Most importantly, Faith broke with socially accepted conventions of idealised motherhood by commenting on her conflicting emotions: 'It's like the best and the worst thing that I've ever done' (The Jonathan Ross Show, ITV, 23rd September 2017). It was an acknowledgment of maternal ambivalence that is rarely presented in a positive light in popular cultural representations of motherhood. The interview passed largely without comment, but was a rare public acknowledgement of the emotional tensions that accompany becoming a parent. There is perhaps something about Paloma Faith's music and image, her honesty about not always fitting into prescribed forms of sexualised femininity, whilst remaining firmly within the lexicon of mainstream pop, which enabled this refreshing antidote to idealised representations of motherhood. Faith's financial and cultural capital makes this a less risky endeavour than it would be for other mothers who do not have access to the same resources. Indeed, it can be argued that her interview represented a temporary diversion from pop's preoccupation with normative forms of femininity. Nevertheless, such glitches in the post-feminist machine are significant for shifting public attitudes towards maternal femininity.

More often the idea that motherhood is not a perfect state of bliss is framed by negative stereotypes of the benefit-scrounging pram pusher. In a powerful analysis of the figure of the 'chav mum', Imogen Tyler discusses feelings of abjection and disgust centred on young, working class, unmarried British women. The chav mum is the 'quintessential sexually excessive, single mother: an immoral, filthy, ignorant, vulgar, tasteless, working class whore' (Tyler 2008, p.26). Ultimately, she represents a failure of femininity. In contrast to this vilified stereotype of economic dependency is

what Tyler has more recently called the 'pregnant beauty', an ideal neoliberal figure in which maternity is commodified as spectacle (Tyler in Gill and Scharff 2011, p.22). Here femininity is achieved, but at the cost of adhering to postfeminist inequalities in which only some women are eligible for success. In this article, I focus on photographic artworks that challenge these representational tropes, specifically Lena Simic's *Contemplation Time: a document of maternity leave* (2007–8) and Eti Wade's *Jocasta* (2008). These works are drawn from the more rarefied discourse of art criticism, which puts them in a different cultural space to popular cultural representations of motherhood. Nevertheless, cultural representations can traverse these positions in ways that can, I argue, be productive for thinking about maternal femininity. With this in mind, I am interested in the ways in which these artworks articulate complex maternal relations and their potential to be used to increase the wellbeing of first-time mothers. My hypothesis is that as forms of cultural expression such artworks enable conversations to take place that would not otherwise happen. Even in supportive post-natal groups facilitated, for example, by organisations such as the National Childbirth Trust in the UK people often feel unable to say things that do not conform to idealised representations of motherhood. Introducing artworks into the discussion is useful because the conversation can be about the artwork rather than about the individual, so has the as-yet untapped potential to make a positive difference to wellbeing in post-natal settings. Both *Contemplation Time* and *Jocasta* are photographic works made by artists who are also mothers. They provide an alternative visual repertoire to popular narratives of failed or achieved maternal femininity, which has the potential to challenge stereotypes. I am not arguing that these works are *intrinsically* progressive, but that their ambiguity can be productive in finding ways to think about motherhood outside of the failure/achievement binary. In a growing literature on maternal art there is relatively little written on Eti Wade, despite what I argue is the importance of her work to discourses of maternal wellbeing. There is more detailed discussion of Lena Simic's practice and my aim is to extend this by reading the work of both artists through the voices of my research participants.

My readings of *Contemplation Time* and *Jocasta* are informed by interviews with six women in the early stages of motherhood. All were first-time mothers and all were interviewed for approximately one hour, using artworks as prompts to our discussion. Participants were from the Bristol area in the UK and selected because they were in their first year of motherhood. Most were recruited via a Facebook group for breastfeeding mothers. They were not, however, part of a friendship group outside of this support network. The membership of the Facebook group is in excess of 1,000 mothers and is diverse in terms of age and class. Within 48 hours of posting a message to the group 70 people had responded to say they would be happy to participate. It quickly became clear that there is a voracious appetite for non-medicalised discursive spaces in which to discuss the details of childcare and its impact on mothers. Certainly, people look to social media to find an alternative discourse, join a community of mothers dealing with similar issues and ask questions. In this particular group there is an atmosphere of mutual support and generosity, which contrasts with the propensity of some social media platforms to perpetuate peer-group competition and self-management. Social media groups fit with the interrupted temporality of caring for an infant. Someone is usually there to empathise in the middle of the night when mothers are awake for night-time feeds and often desperately in need of a supportive gesture, whereas a health visitor can only be contacted within working hours. Most participants were interviewed in their home with one preferring to meet in a local café and another in a library. I asked the participants about their experiences of becoming a mother, their pregnancy, the birth, maternity leave and how their experience of early motherhood compares to their expectations prior to the birth of their child. From the many artworks depicting maternal relations that I could have chosen to show participants I selected ones that articulate a combination of emotions and thus suggest ambiguity rather than certainty. The artworks were on the table or floor and fed into our discussions as and when it felt relevant. Some participants talked about the artworks directly and others talked about the kinds of representations of motherhood that the artworks challenge. Many said that the experience of becoming a mother was harder than they had expected, particularly in relation to feeding, lack of sleep and loss of autonomy. Some also commented

on the pressure of representations of motherhood as perfect, tidy and under control. Eleanor, for example, talked about the mums you see smiling on TV and social media adding that 'the rest is crying along with the baby because you don't know what to do with him'. At the time of the interview Eleanor's son was 12 weeks old. She told me how difficult it had been and about the strain on relations with her partner.

People make light of it [how hard it is], other mothers, saying things like 'sleep when the baby sleeps' or 'you're going to be really tired for the first couple of years' or whatever, but they laugh it off so you're like it can't be that bad. You don't expect it to be that hard because so many people reflect on how hard it was with a smile. (Interview with Eleanor)

Eleanor recounted a story about bursting into tears when a friend of hers had asked how she was. It transpired that her friend had previously found her own entry into motherhood extremely difficult but had not told Eleanor this at the time. Eleanor's tears had punctured the façade of perfect motherhood and enabled the kind of honest conversation that I hoped to achieve through this project.

What follows is as much about the research journey and its methodological implications as it is about readings of the artworks. This is because the artworks are differently charged when placed in front of a woman who has agreed to talk about her (sometimes traumatic) recent experience of bringing a child into the world. Most of the women I interviewed were breastfeeding during the time I spent with them and were inevitably dividing their attention between caring for their baby, talking to me and looking at the artworks. The temporality of this situation was far removed from the slowed down, contemplative approach often (although not always) encouraged by a gallery space. In a sense, the context of reception took the art out of the artworld, even if some nervousness remained at the beginning of the interviews about having the 'right' response. The method involved crossing the discursive terrains of the artworld and post-natal healthcare, which differ substantially in their mode of temporality. Indeed, the idea of taking time to look at art might have seemed indulgent, or simply impossible, to these mothers had it not

been part of a research project. As a mode of consumption, it was necessarily fragmented, partial and interrupted. However, the encounter was intensely embodied as a result both of the artworks, which represent the simultaneous pleasures and pains of mothering, and the lived experience of the participants as they negotiated their own post-partum bodily changes, the bodily needs of their babies and the mutuality of their and their babies' existence. An overriding concern has been to write the embodied experience of mothers back into readings of artworks that speak in their name. The voice of the artist-mother is present and sometimes that of the mother-writer, but less often (if ever) the voices of other mothers who are dealing every day with the embodied realities of mothering and for whom such artworks may resonate. There is a risk that I too speak in their name, perpetuating the marginalisation of the women's experience and finding what I am looking for in their responses to the artworks. In an attempt to mitigate this possibility, I analysed the interview transcripts for recurring themes and those that were expressed either repeatedly or with particular urgency. Artworks depicting motherhood tend not to be read in terms of their potential impact on mental health outcomes, as if an artwork's therapeutic use value somehow detracts from its status within the artworld. However, the insights gained from this method can provide powerful observations for the critical reception of art in addition to offering a new approach to post-natal care and wellbeing. This research is, therefore, aimed at the relationship between art critical discourses and post-natal wellbeing, specifically by using a combination of interview material, first-person narrative and readings of artworks.

Temporality and care as research method

The fact that this research took so long to get off the ground is not insignificant. Prior to the birth of my own child I had naively imagined that during my maternity leave I would have opportunities to reflect on where I wanted my research to go, occasional forays to the park with a sleeping baby and a notebook and pen. Much like Paloma Faith's account the reality did not match my expectations. I did walk to the park most days, sometimes more than once, but when I reached the bench that I always aimed for my sleep-deprived thoughts were filled with developmental milestones or simply feeling the warmth of the sun on my back. It was some months after returning to

work, after over a year on maternity leave, that I realised I had been artificially separating my lived experience of becoming a mother from the 'serious' business of doing research. Even though I was surrounded by people interested in auto-ethnography and other reflexive research methods, somehow it felt like that was different. Looking back, I now understand this as a by-product of the force with which motherhood is constituted through medical and social discourses. It was located in a different space, other to academia, and connected to my inability to get the research done or to think of myself as both a mother and researcher: both identifications fraught with self-doubt about whether you are getting it right and historically considered mutually incompatible.

Eventually, I realised that there was a different separation that needed to be addressed through research: that between new mothers who do not always find an outlet to express complex emotions and artworks that speak of maternal ambivalence. This ambivalence – the co-existence of loving and hating feelings – is particularly difficult to articulate in a culture that so robustly denies its existence. In her important analysis of maternal ambivalence Rozsika Parker argues that:

Our culture defends itself against the recognition of ambivalence originating in the mother by denigrating or idealising her. A denigrated mother is simply hateful and has no love for the child to lose. An idealised mother is hate-free, constant and unreal. (Parker 2005, p.24)

This leaves mothers with few outlets for expressing the need to sometimes be apart from their infants. Issues such as breastfeeding aversion or the desire to return to work are often unspoken because these feelings are culturally perceived as insufficiently maternal. By employing a different frame of reference, one replete with criticisms of idealised representations of motherhood, such artworks have the potential to help parents to explore the emotional complexities of mothering openly, without judgment and without recourse to medicalised discourses of what constitutes motherhood such as the overwhelming emphasis on feeding regimes in discussions with health visitors. When asked about their relationship with the health visitor most participants reported the equation of mothering with breastfeeding as if the rest

of their body is superfluous to the encounter, a part-body whose sole purpose is to provide milk.

I wanted to know how the participants experienced the temporal aspects of maternity leave and early motherhood, for example the routines and repetitions of maternal labour that feature in Simic's work. As it turned out my own temporal experiences of being a mother to a two-year-old became an unavoidable part of the research method. It was necessary to balance the need to be flexible in the timing of interviews, to account for unpredictable sleep patterns, cluster feeding and so on (the last thing anyone wants is the doorbell to ring five minutes after the baby has fallen asleep), with the need to pick my own daughter up from nursery and the discomfort I felt driving further away from her than I would usually be. I struggled with what I increasingly recognised as the temporality of guilt engendered by short bursts of research activity punctuating the continuum of academic work and maternal labour. It felt as though taking 'time out' to conduct interviews was an indulgence rather than work, even though I believed in the importance of the project. I also wrestled with my overwhelming desire not to miss a second with my daughter in between nursery pickup and bedtime. There was a relationship between the conversations I was having with interviewees about interrupted time, the lack of distinction between night and day and the continuity of maternal care and my own fragmented time as a researcher. My responsibilities as a mother necessarily intersected with my responsibilities as a researcher, including my desire to develop an ethics of care with respect to my participants. The myth of the 'objective interviewer', so rigorously challenged by feminist (and other) approaches to social research methods, remained precisely that. What mattered was demonstrating care and empathy whilst trying not to lead the discussion or shape the stories people shared.

The mothers I interviewed did not always feel that their post-natal emotional needs were cared for by the current system of health care visits and time and again I had the sense that this fuelled their willingness to be interviewed for this project. In some cases they longed for greater concern for their own emotional and physical wellbeing beyond what all of them described as the 'tick box' mentality of the post-natal healthcare system. They craved a different kind of conversation that took as its

starting point their own individual subjectivity and felt that medical professionals were only interested in their wellbeing to the extent that it affected the baby:

Whilst you're pregnant you're, like, so looked out for [...] Then as soon as you've had the baby really you're like, see you, bye. You're two separate things now so whilst you're a package, as it were, oh we better look after you, but as soon as you're two separate things you just get dropped and your health is not taken seriously anymore. (Interview with Linda)

It's all about the baby, it's all about the baby, and that's quite hard when you're an independent person. Suddenly everyone cares about the baby and they don't really give two hoots about you. (Interview with Zoe)

In this context being caring involved acknowledging the participants' status as individuals as well as nurturers. Despite the small number of interviews conducted the need for change in this area emerged loud and clear, with most participants taking every opportunity to talk about their need to be treated as an individual.

The participants were all extremely forthcoming in sharing their experiences and thoughts. There were enough similarities in my experience and theirs to build trust. Their comments were often based on a shared understanding of, for example, the difficulty of feeding on demand or the need to find comfortable underwear post-Caesarean section. I was struck by how often the women assumed that I understood and, while often I did, I had not necessarily offered that information. There was a palpable sense of being in it together even if this did not always reflect the reality of our respective situations. The differences in experience were a potential obstacle to maintaining an equitable power balance, which is as much of a myth as the 'objective researcher'. Most participants were in their 30s and all were professional, partnered, middle-class women most of whom had done NCT ante-natal classes, which are economically out of reach for many. As a researcher in her 40s and mother to a two-year-old, I might have represented someone who had come out the other side of maternity leave, back at work and able to afford childcare. Not surprisingly, for some

of the women leaving their child with someone else seemed unimaginable a few weeks into motherhood.

My desire for a non-hierarchical relationship with interviewees was fraught with the kind of difficulties articulated by Ann Oakley in her reflections on criticisms of her 1981 article 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms?'. This was based on a longitudinal study called 'Becoming a Mother' (1974–79) in which Oakley did multiple interviews with 55 women from early pregnancy to five months post-birth. It was an important contribution to social research methodology in which Oakley argued for the significance of a 'transition to friendship' and 'sisterhood' between interviewer and interviewee based on shared gender subordination (Oakley 2016, p.196). In reappraising the criticisms levelled at her earlier argument, Oakley notes that the case she put for non-hierarchical relationships between researcher and researched 'did not acknowledge the vulnerability and social isolation of some new mothers who are likely to welcome the presence of a friendly and knowledgeable listener' (ibid, p.198). In addition to the usual power imbalance between researcher and researched, which can be ameliorated but not eliminated by employing notions of friendship and empathy, almost all of the women in my much smaller cohort were nursing their babies during the interview. I met participants in locations of their choosing and did my best to make people feel at ease, but nursing a baby in front of a stranger who is asking about possibly the most visceral experience of your life is likely to make anyone feel vulnerable.

It felt like all the women I interviewed were keen to tell their stories and several commented on the importance of the project as they saw it. Oakley uses Limerick et al's concept of the 'gift' (1996) in her discussion of a follow-up study undertaken in 2012–13 called 'Looking Back at Becoming a Mother' in which she re-interviewed some of the women who had participated in the original study. She emphasises the unequal power relations that govern the 'gift' in that interviewees donate their stories, but do not control how they are used. There is indeed a tension between giving such personal testimony to a researcher, potentially at a time of great vulnerability, and the structures of academic research that both frame the interviewer's project and enable it to happen. The gift that interviewees give can be simultaneously

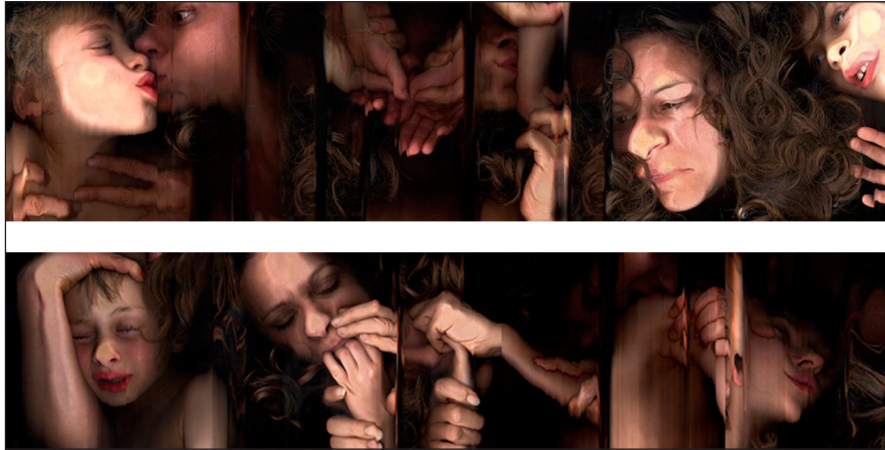
generous and therapeutic as they recount their experience of major life changes. It felt like the women who so generously shared their stories with me were, through this process, unshackled from medicalised discourses of motherhood, which so often focus on what they could do better. The figure of the health visitor engendered a range of feelings including anxiety, fear, reassurance, annoyance, understanding (of how difficult their job is) and disinterest. A detailed examination of the influence of the health visitor is beyond the scope of this article. However, one interviewee exemplified the concern many felt for the power that comes with the institutional framework that the health visitor represents: 'I'm quite conscious of social services as a force in this world. Just think I don't want to show any vulnerability because I don't want my child taken away from me' (Interview with Ruth). By signing the consent form and agreeing to their stories being used for this study my interviewees were, however, still subject to an institutional framework, albeit academic rather than medical.

I decided that the most ethical approach was to be an empathic listener, which involves an understanding of shared experience. There is a danger of over-playing the similarities in experience. After all, how can we really know how another feels? The prevalence of the concept of empathy within social and political discourse has been challenged by the psychologist Paul Bloom who has argued that empathy involves a bias towards those we feel are similar to ourselves at the expense of others who feel distant or unknown to us (Bloom 2018). However, the shock of becoming a mother does provide a link that extends beyond those whose experience feels close to our own. With this sense of knowingness came another set of questions about how much of my own experience to divulge during interviews. I didn't always feel that I got this right, sometimes wishing that I had offered less of my own story and at other times feeling this enabled the interviewee to feel understood. My own experience necessarily shaped the questions I asked to some extent and certainly informed the genesis of the project. The fact of being emotionally able to do these interviews, and enjoy meeting the mothers and their babies, felt strange because it is impossible to entirely expel the pain of childlessness felt at an earlier life stage. There may also be something productive as a researcher in not trying to forget one's own experience

or occupy necessarily-failed objectivity. It is a long, arduous journey from avoiding playgrounds to holding a baby while the woman you are there to interview about her experiences of motherhood makes you a cup of tea. Oakley argues that the concept of the gift within the researcher/interviewee relationship warrants more attention (2016, p.209). I posit the notion of 'empathic affirmation' as one way to extend this thinking. A gift may be unconditional, but the gift I felt able to give, if not in return then alongside, was affirmation of the women's experiences of early motherhood in all its messiness. In this respect the distance of a researcher, the fact that the interviewer and interviewee do not know each other socially, does help because there are no consequences to the interviewee's social capital. This was an opportunity to bear witness to the stories the women told, which were variously conflicted, courageous, joyous and anxious, but always life changing.

Suffocating proximity and fear of separation

One of the dominant themes that emerged from the interviews is the physical attachment of mother to baby and the range of feelings this gives rise to. For one participant Eti Wade's *Jocasta* was especially poignant in its articulation of the simultaneous feelings of suffocating proximity and an intensely joyful and sensual bond with her child. *Jocasta* is a photographic series in which Wade and her son's bodies are pressed up against a scanner. Their faces, arms, hands and hair appear entwined and enmeshed, refusing any clear separation of bodies. Indeed, the work's title is a reference to Greek mythology in which the queen Jocasta unwittingly married her son, Oedipus. The idea of a 'Jocasta complex' is now used to signal the sexual desire of a child towards a parent, although in the Greek story the protagonists were unaware of their familial relationship at the time of their marriage. In some of the images it is only the difference in size of hand, for example, that distinguishes the son's body from that of the mother. The use of the scanner distorts our view of their bodies in a way reminiscent of Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford's photographic series *Closed Contact* (1995–96), in which the flesh of Saville's body is similarly manipulated, or Ana Mendieta's earlier *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* of 1972. The resulting images are powerful as a series because they speak of the range and intensity of emotions between mother and son.



Eti Wade, *Jocasta*, 2008, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

For Linda, the process of production resonated because being pressed up against a scanner 'is kind of how you feel in motherhood, or I do' (Interview with Linda). Linda has suffered from claustrophobia for many years and has been on a courageous journey to have her baby, overcoming fears and coping with extreme sickness and vertigo during her pregnancy before enduring an emergency C-section, which she described as her 'worst nightmare' in the context of her claustrophobia. In response to *Jocasta*, Linda spoke of the bodily intimacy she experiences with her child, in particular when she is breastfeeding during the night. For her, this is a time of conflicting emotions:

It is beautiful at times and it's so peaceful and it's really bonding. So the first image [in *Jocasta*] of her kissing him and him looking like he's kissing her, yeah that special intimacy[...] But at the same time it's like, yeah, you're very alone in that experience. (Interview with Linda)

Despite the child in *Jocasta* being significantly older than Linda's baby she saw in the artwork something of her own experience of nursing a 10-month old:

You're trapped and so then I get quite panicky and anxious at times feeling really, really claustrophobic so this [the artwork] is great, it's that double-edged sword of like, wow, this is an amazing experience, bonding

and beautiful and this isn't going to last forever and, you know, he changes so much so quickly, but at the same time I kind of can't wait for it to be over because it's suffocating in ways. (Interview with Linda)

Linda's comments drew my attention to the details of the photographs in which this double-edged sword is visualised. In one of the images Wade has her son's hand in her mouth and it is unclear whether she is pulling his hand to her mouth with force or if it is willingly placed there. In the next it appears as if she is forcing her son's hand backwards. The strength of her adult hand is marked in comparison to his as she clasps his arm with one hand and pushes his hand backwards with the other. In the image of kissing to which Linda refers the blissful mutuality is combined with Wade's fingers on her son's throat.

The photographs are ambiguous and speak to the emotional complexities involved in motherhood. Wade is acutely aware of the need to challenge social conventions and articulate maternal ambivalence. Her experience of being a mother to three sons and the difficulties she experienced as a first-time mother, which included dealing with her baby's genetic blood condition and her own undiagnosed post-natal depression, inform her practice. She makes her work about motherhood 'to help generate a new cultural space for maternal subjectivity; representing it as a multi-hued, emotional experience, encompassing many shades, and at times presenting it all at once' (Wade 2017, p.134). The photographs that comprise *Jocasta* dare to articulate something that cannot easily be said to a health visitor, namely that maternal relations can include unbridled desire for both mother and child as well as joy, pain, ecstasy and possession. Perhaps most striking is the unboundedness of the mother's embodiment. She appears unrestrained and self-interested as well as loving and nurturing, which is in sharp contrast to the idealised representation of motherhood in which a mother's desires must be repressed in order for her to fulfil her nurturing role.

Wade's work is a much-needed alternative to representations in which mothers are subject to management by others including medical professionals and wider

cultural norms; a Foucauldian governmentality in which behaviour is regulated by discourses that produce the subjects of which they speak (Foucault 1991). In *Jocasta*, Wade is a mother in excess of the role assigned to her. She is desiring and explores the bodily mutuality between mother and child that medical professionals inspect, for example by observing feeds, and hence regulate. Midwives and health visitors are understandably concerned with breastfeeding rates and close contact between mother and baby, which is important for many reasons including bonding and the regulation of a new-born's heartbeat. However, the mother's body is subject to intense scrutiny and regulation at a time of great uncertainty through discourses such as the 'Breast is Best' campaign in the UK, which promotes exclusive breast feeding with no addition of formula milk for the first six months of a baby's life. The focus is on the breast as a source of nourishment but not the whole of the mother's body, which must remain subservient to the child's needs (for a detailed discussion of visualisations of the maternal breast see Johnson & Rintoul, 2019). It is as if the mother's bodily interactions with her baby need to be regulated through such campaigns to keep her from authentically feeling the connection to her baby with her whole body. In *Jocasta*, Wade has broken free of these shackles, which is simultaneously disturbing and liberating.

For Eleanor, *Jocasta* was a visualisation of separation anxiety. Whilst looking at this work she talked about her own mother who sometimes takes her baby for a walk for a couple of hours. Eleanor feels anxious about this because her mother does not hear well and does not have a good sense of direction. She was wary of letting her baby go because she was in the process of learning about his needs. Her anxiety about this was succinctly put: 'what if he needs something and I'm not there?' (Interview with Eleanor). This sense of unease had been confirmed when her baby and mother had returned from a walk with the baby crying and in need of a feed.

The fear of separation is palpable in *Jocasta*. There is a desperation and urgency in the expression on the artist's face and the way she clings on to her son. It is an inversion of the experience of parenting a 'clingy' baby, which was reported by some of the participants. On the one hand the mother is overpowering, overwhelming and

almost trying to return her son to her body. On the other hand, she can be understood as vulnerable and dependent on her son's physicality. The work has been read as 'a mother's desperate attempt to become everything for her child, and to avoid the pains of imminent loss and separation' (Wade 2012). This chimes with the thoughts of Angela, another of my participants, who was thinking about the future and imagining a time when her daughter will not see her parents as her whole world. 'At what point does she stop thinking the world of us? We are her world and then she starts to expand that and we're just people' (Interview with Angela).

The visual details of *Jocasta* present a conflicted sense of separation anxiety. In some of the photographs the mother's need for closeness to her son is all encompassing and yet in others a different dynamic is in play. For me the most upsetting image shows Wade turning away from her son who looks longingly in her direction. Wade's mass of hair lies between their faces and works as a Medusa-esque visual separation between mother and son. The overwhelming reciprocity set up by the images makes any one image that denies this particularly painful to witness.

Interrupted time and maternal subjectivity

Fear of separation is also a theme that Lena Simic explores in her series *Contemplation Time: A Document of Maternity Leave* (2007–8), which is a series of photographs and writings that document weekly walks with her baby to a particular park bench. The work charts Simic's experience of maternity leave with her third baby, what she calls 'that laborious and contemplative in-between time, in fragments, with interruptions, through routine' (Simic 2010). Her work shines a light on the repetitive daily rituals of maternal care, which lends them importance as 'a feminist critical arts practice of everyday life' (Simic 2010). Simic is a Croatian-born artist living and working in Liverpool. Working in the tradition of feminist art of the late 1960s and 70s that focussed on issues such as domestic labour and maintenance, for example Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* (1969), Simic's intention is to 're-create, re-name and most importantly, re-live such maternal labour into critical arts practice, and make the invisible and undervalued labour visible' (Simic, 2010).



Lena Simic, *Contemplation Time: A Document of Maternity Leave*, 2007–8, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Contemplation Time includes a photograph of a pram on its own, with mature trees in the background, photographed from the point of view of the person sitting on the bench, which may or may not be the mother. We cannot see the baby and there is no one else in view. The pram seems a little too far away, which leaves the uncomfortable possibility of abandonment hovering over the image. The lack of maternal figure in the photograph resonated with one of my interviewees, Zoe, who reflected on her own photographs: ‘there are lots of pictures of her [the baby], but not of me. I am “out of the picture”’ (Interview with Zoe). Her observation brings into focus Julia Kristeva’s argument that the maternal body is always already lost in language because signification, and with it language, depends on the loss of the primary maternal referent: ‘language becomes something like the infinite displacement of that *jouissance* that is phantasmatically identified with the maternal body’ (Butler in Salih and Butler 2004, p.154). In this understanding maternal subjectivity does not exist in and of itself, but matters only to the extent that it brings another subjectivity into being. During a number of the interviews I felt that the women

were acutely aware of this denial of subjectivity at the same time as experiencing an intensification and multiplication of their sense of self as a mother, partner and woman.

Rosemary Betterton has highlighted the embodied temporality of Simic's practice and contextualised her ongoing *Maternal Matters* project, which includes *Contemplation Time*, in relation to a wider history of artists working with maternal bodies (Betterton 2014, p.142–144). What emerges is a history of different kinds of temporal experience, which do not fit a teleological understanding of progress:

Women artists have explored the complexity of temporal experiences of their maternal bodies. Their imagining of maternal time as multiple and disruptive rather than singular and progressive can offer means of thinking about how maternal subjects encounter motherhood in ways that anticipate feminist theory. (Betterton 2014, p.159)

Certainly, a number of my interviewees commented on the temporality of their lives and how this had changed since giving birth. This was sometimes because I had explicitly asked about how they experience time and at other times it came up in relation to something else. Zoe talked about 'living between the non-fussy times, so your time becomes baby time and your time with your partner becomes all about baby time'. The repetition involved in maternal care was a contrast to the differently experienced time of paid work:

My job wasn't really structured or routine in any way. It was quite different every day so suddenly having a day that's the same every day, I would describe it as, it's just relentless and thankless, essentially, until they start smiling at you. (Interview with Zoe)

The ongoing, durational, sometimes relentless temporality of everyday life with a young baby, in which there can be little distinction between night and day, was keenly felt by Eleanor who recounted a recent incident in which her ability to cope had been stretched:

In the morning he'd been crying all night. I'd had him the whole of the day before because my husband does a lot of long shifts and he was waking up every two hours and woke up again at half past five. I just cried a little bit, like, I cannot do this feed, I can't do it, I'm exhausted. (Interview with Eleanor)

The fact that all of the participants had partners was significant because most, like Eleanor, could ask their partner to take the baby for a few minutes while they regrouped. This enabled Eleanor to re-set and do the next feed. Many expressed the need for the continuum of maternal care to be punctuated with short breaks, which for a different group of participants would not have been an option. Many of the participants described their day as a continual series of responses to the baby's needs. As Zoe put it 'time becomes from nappy change to boob to sleep to "oh my god I've got to do the washing"'. Night time was often described as a series of interruptions with the baby waking several times (for some, every two hours) for a feed. It was a materialisation of Lisa Baraitser's argument that 'interruption constitutes the ground of maternal experience' (Baraitser 2008, p.76). The interruptions or disturbances of maternal care are visualised in Simic's photographs and diary entries. They constitute the raw material of her practice. This disturbance is a two-sided phenomenon, at once utterly sapping the mother's energy and demanding her to re-imagine her own potential:

This disturbance, which I am arguing structures maternal subjectivity, can be experienced as depleting, exhausting, disabling and controlling, but also seems to have the potential to be an enlivening and productive encounter, one that forces a mother to access a kind of thinking and feeling outside of her usual repertoire, pushes her to a state of being "beside herself" with all the overtones this brings of intensity, exhilaration and excitation as well as anxiety and despair. (Baraitser 2008, p.75)

The notion of a mother being 'beside herself' in this expanded sense enables a more detailed examination of the experience of maternal exhaustion because it acknowl-

edges the mother's ability to find another register of care. Indeed, Eleanor had managed to find it in her to do the next feed despite her extreme tiredness. This was an intensely bodily experience of time in which Eleanor had found the stamina to keep going. Betterton observes the embodied nature of temporality in artworks ranging from Simic's photographs to Bobby Baker's performance works. Baker has worked across a range of media including drawing, performance and multi-media. Her autobiographical performance work *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988) uses food/feeding to examine the anxieties, pleasures and pains that accompany daily life as a mother. Anxieties over feeding, as an experience that is both bodily and temporal, were voiced by several of my interviewees. Even beyond concerns about feeding, the connection between their experience of time and their experience of their own bodies was inextricably linked.

You get to about four o'clock and you can't wait for your partner to get home from work so you can hand the baby over. You just don't want the baby on you anymore [...] Nobody really prepares you for that, but everyone you speak to feels exactly the same and also feels guilty about it. (Interview with Zoe)

Guilt played a significant part in these discussions. It suggests the need for an expanded understanding of the temporality of guilt experienced by parents who, like Zoe, love their children dearly, but also need a break as one would from any job that is so all-consuming. As Eleanor put it, "It's a job and it's 24 hours a day". It is as if to talk about parenting using the language of paid work is unconscionable because this is so far removed from dominant representations of motherhood as a mode of being rather than an activity, even though we know it is usually both. The discussions I had with interviewees often chimed with Simic's aim of articulating the invisible *work* of motherhood.

It is important for many artists, including Wade and Simic, to align their work as artists and mothers in an artworld that is notoriously unforgiving of the demands of raising children. Across the arts a number of organisations have been set up in

response to this including the theatre collective 'Prams in the Hall' who take their name in defiance of literary critic Cyril Connolly's assertion in 1938 that 'There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hallway' (pramsinthehall.com 2018). Their aim is to practice a different working model, which makes it possible for theatre professionals with children to continue to work. This includes on-site childcare sharing, allowing young children into rehearsal rooms and flexible hours for those with children at school. The need for a progressive approach to the relationship between work and motherhood was a topic of conversation with one interviewee, Ruth, who had experienced a lot of pressure to go back to work early. Ruth works as a university lecturer and had been expected to work whilst on maternity leave. This had left her feeling stressed and guilty for the time spent responding to work emails, writing grant proposals and authoring papers rather than being with her baby. Ruth was expected to keep maintaining her work profile as if her maternity leave was holiday time from which she could justifiably be interrupted. In the context of this problematic division between 'work time' and 'maternal time', often misunderstood as 'time off', Simic's process of combining her life as an artist and a mother is a necessary intervention.

Simic's process of making art out of the daily routines of maternity leave resonated with Linda who told me that she takes photographs every day and also goes for walks with her baby: 'I photograph every day because I'm not being creative in any other way and as a creative person I'm really missing that' (Interview with Linda). When I showed her *Contemplation Time* she found it interesting and told me that she has almost exactly the same photograph. The routines of maternal labour documented by Simic in this work, as well as a later work called *Friday Records: A Document of Maternity Leave* (2014), make visible achievements that often go unrecognised in a culture in which productivity is narrowly defined. A partial image of a diary entry in *Friday Records* reads 'I managed to vacuum house today' and the line underneath includes the word 'achievement'. For Linda, however, routine provided some reassurance that was lacking at an earlier stage:

At the start and up until a couple of months ago there was no routine and I found that quite, erm, scary I suppose because you never knew what each

day was going to bring and also I really feared him crying a lot, so I would do everything I could to make sure he didn't cry. (Interview with Linda)

Several participants spoke of the positive reassurance enabled by routine or the desire to get to this point. Listening to these stories took me back to the quiet, undramatic but crucially important tenor of Simic's work, making visible the continuity of care that this involves.

The voices and experiences of the women I interviewed made me think differently about the artworks. They saw some of their own experience in these works. Sometimes these thoughts were formed alongside the artworks, sometimes directly in response to them or as part of a wide-ranging discussion about the shock of new motherhood. The relationship between the artworks, the mothers who agreed to be interviewed and my own investment in challenging dominant constructions of motherhood, produced a discursive space in which feelings about maternal ambivalence were variously expressed, intimated, realised and possibly hidden. Ultimately, I was struck by the overlapping emotions of maternal care – joy, anxiety, love, fear and guilt – and the need for interviewees to voice their own subjectivity as mothers and women.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Johnson, C. 2019. Maternal Art and Post-Natal Wellbeing: Proximity and Separation in Lena Simic's *Contemplation Time* (2007–8) and Eti Wade's *Jocasta* (2008). *Studies in the Maternal*, 11(1): 1, pp.1–23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.263>

Published: 05 November 2019

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