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The Monsters Who Raise Us: Unearthing the Haunted Institution of Motherhood

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The Monsters Who Raise Us: *Unearthing the Haunted Institution of Motherhood*

“Mothers are all slightly insane.”
- J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

I am about 4 years old. My mother is standing in the kitchen, chatting pleasantly with a neighbor on the corded home phone. I’m not paying attention to what they are talking about, only that I am very hungry, so I ask my mom for a snack. She holds up her finger to tell me to wait one minute. I wait for what my 4 year old brain imagines to be a minute. I ask again, a bit more emphatically. She again, a bit more emphatically, holds up her index finger. I stamp my feet and whine

“MOOOOOOOOM!” In an instant, she snaps her head around and shoots me a stare that I will never forget. It’s icy, almost unrecognizable as the warm woman who bakes cookies with me, cheers me on at my soccer games and tucks me in at night. My stomach drops. I am suddenly not hungry.



Pictured: Anne Morgan and Isabella Saldana
Photo by Fred Zwicky
From *Dance at Illinois’ Studio Dance 2023*

How do we write the story of mothers? Mothers are the final thanks in Oscar acceptance speeches and the first mentions in therapy sessions. Childhood memories are critical in creating our identities for the rest of our lives, and many of my most potent childhood memories revolve around my mother. In these memories, she is either a glowing saint of a woman, creating fun, laughter and love in our home; or she is detached and irritated, on the precipice of a frustrated outburst. Wracking my brain for memories of my mother, she exists in a spaces of black and white; there is no in between.

In terms of neuroscience, this makes sense. Memories that are novel or strongly linked to emotion are most likely to be stored in your long term memory. Lisa Genova explains in her book, *Remember: The Science of Memory and the Art of Forgetting*, “Emotion and surprise activate a

part of your brain called the amygdala, which, when stimulated, sends powerful signals to your hippocampus that basically communicate this: *Hey, what's going on right now is super important. You're going to want to remember this. Consolidate it!*"(82). The brain contextualizes all of the sensorial and semantic details surrounding the event and captures those connections. Since you have told your brain that these events matter, you are also more likely to revisit those memories and strengthen them further. This is why what you ate for dinner last Tuesday is not nearly as memorable as the first time seeing the Nutcracker.

In this way, our brains create our mothers in the extremes. Only the the heavily emotional memories make the cut and so I am left with a caricature of the nuanced human who raised me. As a new mother, I have been revisiting these early memories of my mother often in an attempt to better understand how I can approach motherhood for myself. There are volumes and volumes of books and blogs that provide contradictory information about the highly specific way to raise your child without causing permanent psychological damage. These sources detail exact phrases to use when disciplining or redirecting your child and which toys to ban from your house in fear that certain toys themselves are responsible for upholding traditional gender roles. When the pressure of stopping the cycle of all societal ills rest on the shoulders of mothers, is successful mothering possible?

To better understand how we perceive people who transition into motherhood, I look to the obvious place: horror films. The horror movie genre is full of mother-as-monster tropes. From *The Curse of La Llorona*, to *The Others*, to *The Babadook*, we see mothers who succumb to a haunted hysteria when trying to protect their children from unbanishable ghosts. They spend the whole movie shielding their children from the erratic haunting events, often resulting in them being flung into walls like rag dolls as they stand between the ghosts and their children. As we see these mothers' mental health deteriorate due to unsustainable circumstances, these mothers transition from the innocents of the hauntings alongside their children to the co-conspirators in the hauntings, often by spiritual possession, and end up doing the most horrifying thing of all: forsaking their children's safety. This pivotal moment in the story is meant to be the twist to change audiences' perception. In the first part of the story, you believe the mother to be an innocent victim of the haunting with the children. However, as the story progresses, the audience finds them to be

fallible, corruptible and therefore, the audience is expected to change their allegiance away from the mothers.¹

Horror movies have long been commenting on societal values of who deserves to live and whose death is considered unfortunate inevitability; the single Black character almost always dies first, and the innocent white virgin and children make it to the end. But while many of these tropes rely on a static character type to fulfill the horror genre formula, the mother figure in horror is often mutable. This journey from innocence to culpability seems to reflect our societal values of mothers. They serve only to protect the children at any cost to personal safety or happiness. We value martyrdom in our mothers and publicly applaud the mothers who sacrifice themselves for their families. Common Mother's Day cards and posts reinforce this value with phrases like "You dropped whatever you were doing whenever I needed you" and "You never buy anything for yourself so that we can have everything we want". Self-sacrifice is expected and revered in mothers, but is it sustainable? Does the desire for self-preservation, and the inability to cope with unmanageable circumstance with a happy demeanor, make us, mothers, monsters?

I argue that due to societal preconceptions and unattainable expectations of mothers, it is inevitable that mothers become monstrous to those on the outside of the motherhood experience. The reality of the experience of motherhood will never fully meet cultural expectations of the pure joy that is supposed to manifest in the arrival of a child. This dissonance leads to mothers who, when they don't express loving every moment of motherhood, are read as horrifying. The consequences of this are mothers feeling banished to the dark corners, the hills, and under the beds of society; to lurk quietly in shame and silence. Through choreographic, embodied, storied, and written research, I hope to unearth the suppressed psychological and physical experiences of becoming a mother and give context and backstory to the monsters. I am interested in the experiential journey of becoming a monster and how one reckons with that permanent transformation. I seek to explore the narrow borders of where touch turns from motherly to monstrous. Where is the line from where physical con-

¹ A small number of horror movies such as *Rosemary's Baby* and the more recent *False Positive*, provide more overt, conscious commentary on the gaslighting surrounding women during pregnancy and motherhood. Both of the films highlight the isolation and helplessness that women experience while pregnant. However, even in these films, we find the protagonists faced with impossible situations at the end of the films: either mother the children that were created by evil, or abandon these children. Though neither answer will absolve the mother, societally, we view the latter as far worse.

tact shifts from comforting to smothering; from support to co-dependence; from supportive to controlling?² This razor thin line is where I feel motherhood truly lies. It is the space in-between; the not perfect yet not intentionally harmful space in which we monsters survive.

As a choreographer, my research is guided by the desire to identify the visceral sense of my experience of early motherhood. What does early motherhood *feel* like in my body? Marked by extremes of euphoria and mania, with the penchant for changing on a dime, it is the feeling not of *losing* one's mind but of finding new emotions, abilities and ways of knowing that have been quietly lurking in the corners of one's mind. It is the struggle to communicate the elusive fog happiness³ without dismissing the extreme brain fog and anxieties that have developed since bringing life into the world. These research questions are being synthesized into a 20-minute choreographic work, featuring nine undergraduate dancers from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and being presented at the



Pictured (from left to right): Jordyn Gibson, Anne Morgan, Isabella Saldana, and Kate Henderson
Photo by Fred Zwicky
From Dance at Illinois' Studio Dance 2023

Krannert Center for the Performing Arts in January of 2023. The great challenge of this choreographic process for me is to explore how to give extremes space in the in-between. This seems utterly counterintuitive due to the fact that the very nature of extremes does not allow them nuance, but in this research I explore the possibility that the thin boundary between mother and monster might allow this.

² Hilary Duff was recently criticized for kissing her 9 year old son on the lips as he walked into school, as fans thought it was inappropriate or too intimate between a mother and son. However, a mother would be equally or more criticized for impersonal or obligatory touch towards their child. I grew his body inside of mine and yet there seems to be an unwritten, paced trajectory postpartum from constant physical contact to brief side hugs as he leaves for the 2nd grade. Civility allows us not to consciously understand all of the unwritten rules in our society, but only to know when they are being broken. I am curious about physically engaging with that threshold.

³ Fog Happiness is a term coined by author Gretchen Rubin. She describes, "Fog happiness is the kind of happiness you get from activities that, closely examined, don't really seem to bring much happiness at all—yet somehow they do."

To clarify, in this paper I define motherhood as distinctly different from parenthood, as parenthood and fatherhood have very different expectations and implications. I seek to frame the argument around the construct of motherhood, and not the individual mothers themselves. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich describes the distinction between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood; the experience is her personal understanding of raising children as a scholar, poet and human being, while the institution is imposed on mothers and is used as a means of patriarchal control. She describes that it was not the bearing and raising of children that she rejected, but the institutional expectations and the inevitability of motherhood. She writes, "I had no idea of what I wanted, what I could or could not choose. I only knew that to have a child was to assume adult womanhood," (5). While Rich does argue in this 1976 work that all women are seen primarily as mothers or potential mothers, I believe many of her assertion can be opened up to be more inclusive of nonbinary gender as well.

As we understand that the dominance of the patriarchy is more complex than men versus women, I believe that motherhood can be interpreted more broadly than a symptom felt only by people who identify as cis women. While I am discussing the institution of motherhood as a whole, it is also important to consider the various personal intersections that affect individual experiences of motherhood. Although Rich argues that motherhood is the societal imperative for women, not all motherhood is seen as socially valid. In "Punks, Pulldaggers and Welfare Queens", Cathy Cohen explores the ways in which queerness exists within realms of heterosexuality. She asks, "...how would queer activists understand politically lives of women - in particular women of color - on welfare, who may fit in the category of heterosexual, but whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral or worthy of state support?" (443). Motherhood that exists outside of the wealthy, white, cis, heterosexual, legally bound realm is vilified for their mere existence before taking any actions which might be deemed controversial. While motherhood is not a monolith, I hope to draw on generalizations, tropes and assumptions that are societally pervasive and personally felt.

In "A Glossary of Haunting", Eve Tuck defines "~~Mother: Somewhere between monsters and mutual implication,~~" (649). She follows by describing mutual implication as defined by Anzaldúa as "a way of describing how the colonized and the colonizer 'leak' into each other's lives...after centuries of settlement," (649). I was struck by this in reference to motherhood. In this scenario, who is the colonizer? In fear of unconsciously psychologically damaging my child, I found it hard to run the scenario of my

child as a colonizer. However, upon further thought, the metaphor holds some water. This child invaded my body, taking over for 9 months; rearranging the geography of my organs, dictating what I could put into my body, and reorienting people's perceptions of my intentions and abilities. After birth, my life remains in service to this tiny human around the clock which has stripped me of my former identity. While I don't seek to minimize the systemic and generational trauma that settler colonialism has wrought on the majority of people on the globe, I think the "leak" that Tuck describes can be applied to the ways in which mothers cite losing their identities postpartum and how our own mothers become monsters that haunt our memories. I find it hard to recall the essence of my former self while constantly being inundated with the needs and ties to my child⁴.

This complex yet common, corporeal experience is choreographic in and of itself. The expansion and then extension of the physical body between pregnancy and tending to a new baby around the clock has so much distinct sensory information and spatial implications. The boundaries between mother and child are at least, permeable and at a most extreme level, non-existent. Although I am seeking to center the mother figure in my choreography rather than the child, it seems impossible to do so without including some relationality to the child because of this intimate physical entanglement. I am curious about the ways the "leak" of the child to the mother can become a flood if the boundaries are erased.⁵ What are the consequences of the leak becoming more insistent and stronger over time?

Tuck defines a monster as "...one who has been wronged and seeks justice... Monsters show up when they are denied; yet there is no understanding the monster," (649). Monsters do not appear from nothing, but they are created through conditioning over time. With *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, it is not hard to see the systemic issues that create monsters from mothers. The United States continues to be a country that bolsters

⁴ I feel compelled to defend my intentions in this paper and my status as a mother by stating very plainly: I love my son.

⁵ I explore this notion physically in a duet that appeared in the shadows of the upstage corner in the opening of the piece. One of the dancers, Jordyn, sits in a chair facing the audience, while the other dancer, Kate, sits on her lap facing upstage, completely smothering Jordyn with her body. In the dim lighting upstage, the audience can only see hands moving but cannot clearly distinguish one body from the other or make out either of the dancers' faces. When showing this section early in the process, many viewers focused on Kate as an obvious "child figure" when for me, her physicality served to block Jordyn from view and act as an impossible weight to work around. In the end of the piece, we find her still physically negotiating the weight where Kate had previously been even though she appears separate in the stage space.

much of its political principles on “family values” and yet provides no support for birthing or raising a child. Although it varies greatly from state to state, the average cost of giving birth vaginally, without complications in the United States is \$10,808. This can increase to \$30,000 when adding in prenatal and postnatal care (Hoffower). The average cost of childcare in the U.S. is nearly \$16,000 per year, or around 21% of the median income in the U.S. for a family of three (Hoffower).

With this enormous financial burden in conjunction with the well-documented gender wage gap in the U.S., it is no surprise that 3.5 million women, or 45% of mothers of school-age children exited the workforce between March and April of 2020 (US Census). As the wage gap makes it difficult for women to be the higher paid partner in a heterosexual household, mothers were the ones who were expected and required to leave their jobs in service of their children. The pandemic, of course, exacerbated this situation, but the working conditions pushing mothers out of the workforce is nothing new. The “Motherhood Penalty” has shown to keep mothers from gaining promotions, tenure, and pay increases, mostly through the perceptions of employers and coworkers. A recent study found that 41% of employed Americans perceive working moms to be less devoted to their work and one-third judge them for needing a flexible schedule (Fox).

While there are bottom line concerns for employers looking to hire parents who may require flexibility or backup childcare as a part of their employment package, this perception that hiring a person with children will affect productivity only applies to mothers. While mothers lose 4% off of their hourly wages per child, mens’ earnings increase by 6% after becoming fathers (Kitroeff). The issue is not that parents need accommodations for their children, but that mothers, regardless of employment status, are assumed to be the ones in charge of children when systemic structures like unexpected public school closures or lack of public preschool fail. With supporting a household on a single income becoming less possible, mothers are put in an impossible situation. We are not allowed the bodily autonomy to decide whether or not to be mothers, then required to provide (publicly) unconditional love and support for the child, while being responsible for their safety and whereabouts around the clock for 18 years, and also being required to work in workplaces where coworkers will constantly be annoyed by a perceived, impending inconvenience.⁶

In addition to the very tangible, biological, legislative and capitalistic constraints on mothers, there are the unrealistic expectations of de-

⁶ I felt the need to locate undeniable statistics that affirm my personal feelings and prove that I am not simply weak, but it is a system that works against me.

meanor.⁷ Mothers are bound to this idea that they must be in constant adoration and awe of their children. This idea is perpetuated through media, generations of mothers before, and intrusive people in the grocery store. However, most human's emotional ranges span far beyond the narrow confines of adoration and awe. Within the realm of taking complete care of the vast needs of another human being, other, less pleasant emotions are bound to arise.

Adrienne Rich describes the communing of a group of poets, most of whom were mothers and how they all felt empathy for a woman in the news who had recently murdered her two children. There was a mutual understanding of how this unspeakable act could be perpetrated by a seemingly otherwise normal mother. "We spoke of the murderous anger at our children, because there was no one and nothing else on which to discharge anger.⁸ We spoke in the tentative, sometimes rising, sometimes bitterly witty, unrheterical tones and language of women who had met together over our common work, poetry, and who found another common ground in an unacceptable, but undeniable anger,"



Pictured: Melanie Dubois
Photo by Fred Zwicky
From Dance at Illinois' Studio Dance 2023

⁷ But who wants to read a paper that is a list of complaints? Am I just using statistics to verify my whining?

⁸ I believe this anger resides in the feminine body long before children appear. Although none of the dancers in the piece were mothers, the visceral feeling of swallowing their rage because there was no acceptable place to discharge it was already quite familiar. We found it incredibly familiar to flirt with the concept of anger leaking; we'd mostly experienced that with sideward glances, passive aggression and concealed hand gestures. But the complete release of unbridled anger into the space was foreign to all of us. This was the part of the process that took the longest to emerge; to find an authentic release of rage through the body.

(5).⁹ This unacceptable anger haunts the institution of motherhood.¹⁰

Rich wrote *Of Woman Born* in 1976 and it would seem as though women and mothers had made significant progress towards equality in those 46 years, but upon further evaluation, it is difficult to find the differences. Although more of the feminine population has entered the workforce, mostly out of necessity, the physical, psychological and emotional burden we place on mothers seems unchanged. It still seems the most horrifying thing a mother can do is to have anger or frustration towards her children or her status as a mother. Even with the PPMD surveys that are intended to provide support, many mothers feel guilty for having negative feelings postpartum. The idea that having a newborn baby is anything other than a mother's pure bliss is still seen as shameful. Unlike Rich's group of empathetic poets, many mothers suppress this rage, allowing it to fester below the surface, growing over time. But this rage cannot be suppressed forever, and eventually, all of these factors take their toll.

This is how monsters are created.

When talking about this research with others, many people have responded with "Well, of course motherhood is hard". Anytime a new parent says "Nobody tells you how hard it is," people often roll their eyes, because it's much of what veteran parents talk about with expectant parents.

⁹ I personally find all of the glaring statistics that compound to create this invisible pressure on mothers in the United States infuriating. I was hoping that I would gain some sort of catharsis by writing them all down; counting them out and creating a methodical explanation for how the process of monster-making occurs. However, it only seems to make me angrier, particularly because most of this information is not new; to employers, domestic partners, or mothers themselves. The anger arises from the blissful ignorance or acceptance of these states of raising children, but where can it be unleashed?

¹⁰ Regardless of its societal stigma, this rage is often a biological inevitability. Approximately 10-15% of women experience a Postpartum Mood Disorder (PPMD) which can take the form of depression, anxiety, bipolar, obsessive compulsion or in rare cases psychosis (Osborne). Of course, these numbers are based on diagnosed cases of PPMD. In the United States before leaving the hospital after giving birth, new mothers are required to take a survey that has them track the frequency of different mood indicators on a scale of 1-5 (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always). At the 6-week postpartum visit, mothers are asked again to fill out this survey. Even though PPMD can appear at any time during the first year of the child's life, there are no further standard follow-up appointments until the next year. The odds that the percentage of women reporting PPMD are even remotely close to the percentage of women experiencing PPMD I assume to be very slim. PPMD have no known causes but can be exacerbated by a lack of sleep; rather inconvenient with a newborn.

For me, the abstract understanding of the difficulties I would face as a parent and the lived experience of them were completely incommensurable. There is an understanding that one will experience a loss of sleep as a new parent and then there is the lived identity crisis of working off of 6 months of 4 hours of sleep per night and what it has done to me as a person. I used to consider myself intelligent, creative, fun, and vibrant and in that moment, I was none of those things. It is a terrifyingly disorienting moment to be 30 years into one's life and to feel you know nothing about yourself anymore. I expected the "who am I as a mother?" moment, but I did not expect "Who am I at all?"

This is where my choreographic process began. If I felt the experience of motherhood was not being properly explained through words, how could it be understood? As with many things, I understand it through my



Pictured: Jordyn Gibson
Photo by Fred Zwicky
From Dance at Illinois' Studio Dance 2023

body.¹¹ In our rehearsals, we began investigating embodying monstrosity.¹² From the rhythm of creeping to explosive energy, to the distorted or unnatural movements and interactions between body parts of the self. We watched a scene from the *Evil Dead 2* in which the protagonist's hand becomes murderously possessed and is out of his control and then compared it to the videos of my unborn

¹¹ I started thinking about what it sounded like; what sounds would immediately transport to the rocking chair in the corner of the nursery. Working with composer Cody Jensen, we began working on a score that combined the incessant droning of a breast pump with repetitive bluegrass riffs, intolerably high pitched ringing and the all enveloping wash of white noise. We worked together to create the balance of overstimulation and monotony that sonically created the space of early motherhood.

¹² I am arguing that society inevitably turns mothers into monsters, but what does that look like? What makes a mother monstrous? Much like in real life, you would know a monster when you see it.

son writhing around in my gut.¹³ We have explored the space where the intention of contact shifts from gentle to controlling as well as scores in which one partner is giving their full weight through the entire duration. It is through these manipulations of touch and time that I feel I can at least somewhat render the smothering, overwhelming feeling of motherhood.

The rhythm of extreme emotional states that come and go very quickly also greatly influenced how I worked in the studio. These moments of pure peace and comfort that are abruptly interrupted by anxiety or rage often leak into each other in ways that are messy and complex.¹⁴ We explored these ideas more literally with the distinct timing of early motherhood in which time can pass incredibly slowly in the wee hours of the morning while your baby is feeding, but can seem like a blink of an eye when they are napping. I gave the dancers “tasks” which they had to complete frantically within a 32 second time period, representing the exactly 32 minute naps my son took from ages 3-6 months. We have explored slow-moving, high-effort floor work as a means of accessing the feeling of time creeping by with the immeasurable weight of mothering. We also considered the idea in terms of space: what of the motherhood identity is centered and what gets pushed to the peripheries?¹⁵

¹³ It is the mom texting while her kids call her name from the playground; it is the mother ignoring her child’s tantrum at the supermarket; it is the mother who has not slept through the night in 9 months and has all but lost any interest in keeping up her appearance at work; it is the mother who, when asked about her newborn baby, doesn’t gush, but simply says “it’s hard.” These are the things we look at in mothers as a society and cringe.

¹⁴ It does not take abject neglect or abuse for a mother to become a monster. It is the moments of human vulnerability and emotional coping that are seen to be a failing as a mother. Although it may seem like a mother, one who creates and sustains life, is epitome of a human, mothers are not given any leeway in terms of expressing their humanity.

¹⁵ But even through guided explorations of specific qualities that I find relevant to motherhood, how do I describe to my cast of dancers, none of whom are mothers, the wholly embodied experience of motherhood? What parts are unknown, misunderstood, or sanitized for mass consumption? How do I explain the dark thoughts that creep in? The thoughts of walking away from the screaming stroller, getting in the car and turning off my phone; disappearing for a few days. I visibly shudder as these thoughts cross my mind time and time again. I’m ashamed to even own them for a fleeting moment. How do I write this down, prepare a score, and explain the excruciating postpartum mundanity that makes me feel like disappearing would be an ideal solution, even if only for a moment? Does the monster know it is monstrous?

My mother is by all accounts a very accomplished woman. She was valedictorian of her high school, one of only ten women in her medical school class, and consistently voted a “Top Doc” in Tennessee’s annual reviews of doctors in the state. She spearheads two book clubs and a women’s bible study group, as well as being an elder in the church, a patron of the arts, and a regular attendee at a local yoga studio. In all that she does and everything that she is, I have distilled her, uncomplicated her to fit a clean narrative of who she is so I can establish a clean narrative for myself. I can only think of her in relation to myself and therefore I fail to comprehend her fully in every capacity that she inhabits.

Mothers who place value on life outside of their homes are illegible. In our culture, motherhood is understood to be a singular, all consuming pursuit and strong desires outside of that are read as monstrous. Many horror mother figures such as the mothers in *Carrie* and *Umma*, are failing at coping with their own generational motherhood trauma, and yet the audience does not see them as people who are hurting, but as monsters who hurt their children for no (valid) reason. Mothers are not allowed to be nuanced human beings. They are not afforded backstories, trauma, or any reasons for angry outbursts or moments of weakness in the name of self-preservation.¹⁶ Mothers must either be saint or monster.¹⁷

Our brains know to consolidate memories that we deem to be formative or important in order to preserve them in our minds. It identifies novelty and assigns meaning to these memories. But it can also create and edit memories to fit the narratives that we construct around ourselves.

¹⁶ It seems almost trivial to mourn the loss of my sexual self as a mother, when I am barely recognizable as a human being. There is endless messaging to mothers who show their bodies after children or merely have bodies in public spaces, that being sexually attractive to other people doesn’t set a good example for their children. Mothers are expected to “snap back” and be attractive for their spouses, but never crossing the line into outwardly sexually suggestive. Women are taught from an early age that nonconsensual sexual attraction is what most men are seeking; able to be sexually objectified without actually being sexual. I try to disentangle my sexuality from being sexualized or even just feeling attractive, and I have difficulty deciphering which part of my sexuality I am mourning. Mostly, I miss understanding of how I am perceived while walking through the world. There is a shift in perception when girls enter into puberty and another shift when a woman becomes a mother; and with this, a shift in public sexual allowance. Regardless of the fact that sexuality is the origin for how many children arrive into the world, mothers who express any sexuality seem cringeworthy, illegible or out of place. So in the midst of the choreographic chaos, we decided we needed some ass shaking.

¹⁷ I also reckon with the knowledge that my son will most likely understand me in this way as he gets older. What stories will he tell when he talks about me with his therapist? Will he remember the times I spent crying over him while he wailed in my lap or do I get a pass on that because he was too young to remember?

Memories are easily contaminated with ideas and suggestions from other people's stories of similar experiences and our brain can essential riff on the memory itself in a process known as confabulation. Confabulation is essentially a form of memory error that is constructed through your eager-to-believe-anything subconscious memory so that the original memory can no longer be reliable as a factually accurate account (Genova 109). Because of this, my mother, as I have created her in my mind, is a mix of her actions, other people's mothers I have met, mothers in horror films, and my overall societal understandings of how mothers should behave. Mothers create us, but in a way, we also psychologically create our mothers through our memories and the ways we manipulate them.

Psychoanalyst and theorist Melanie Klein posits that from the early stages of life, infants understand their mothers to be objects, not other animate beings. In her theory, the first objects that infants identify are mother and her breasts. These objects are the basis for the young children's internal fantasies, which they create as a means of understanding the world. Infants then begin categorizing these objects, including the mother and her breasts, as "Good" or "Bad", which could change whether or not a breast is full or empty and their stomachs are full or empty (Britzman).¹⁸In Klein's view, children literally begin creating their own stories of their mothers at birth that operate between this saint or monster paradigm that then plagues our memories of our mothers for the remainder of our lives.

Young children are wired to be egotistical, self-centered beings. This is how they explore their worlds and construct themselves psychologically, but it also makes their senses of what is going on particularly fallible, even before the years of confabulation has contaminated these nascent memories. Children miss critical information that provides the needed nuance and the motivations for the actions of the mothers who raised them and therefore can often not fully see their parents until they are much older, if ever. As I try to separate my individual mother from the institution of motherhood, the lines become blurrier the deeper I dive. I have psycholog-

¹⁸ The various positions in which the lactation consultants recommend when trying to feed the baby and the manipulations that you are required to make of your breast to convince your baby to eat feel highly practiced and anything but natural; frantically shifting my arms from the "football" hold to the "crossbody", to "cradle" trying to entice this child by squishing your nipple "like a hamburger". I felt distinctly unattractive contorting myself to dangle my breast in front of my baby's face, like a lure in front of a fish while trying to cover myself with a shawl, facing away from the rest of the patrons in the restaurant. Huddled up facing the corner of a room hunched over my infant to feed him milk contaminated with the blood from my chapped nipples, this is not what I was promised would be a very connecting and sweet experience. If you choose not to breastfeed to preserve your sanity or your nipples, you are a monster.

when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view,” (xvii). Gordon uses hauntings as a method of creating alternate realities and futures as a means of understanding the remnants and ghosts of political systems and their lasting effects. This layered reality resonates with my experience of motherhood thus far. I reside amongst the fog happiness and the hauntings of the unmet expectations of myself as a mother while imagining alternate realities that are clearer, less messy.



Pictured: Isabella Saldana and Anne Morgan
Photo by Fred Zwicky
From Dance at Illinois' Studio Dance 2023

“When [Cash] was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not.”

- Addie, the deceased mother in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*

I have been avoiding writing about this topic for almost a year now. This is something that has consumed my identity and I resisted acknowledging that. However, I believe that I have not been resisting being a mother as much as I have been resisting the codified role of motherhood. As much as my son was so wanted, I didn’t want to enter the institution of motherhood. Rich describes this feeling by stating, “I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is ‘unconditional’; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren’t those parts then abnormal, monstrous?” (3). The expectations of motherhood haunt me, and in many ways I feel doomed to be tormented by them for the rest of my life. There is no way to fulfill what a child expects a mother to be and yet it feels like a very thin margin between meeting those expectations and failing epically. There is a fine line between nurturing and smothering, fostering independence and neglect, showing my humanity

and placing too much on my child emotionally. In these pass/fail scenarios, there is little in between space, but I assert that true motherhood lies in the precarity of the in-between spaces.

So much of my first year of being a mother has laid outside the normative realm of time and space. The three-hour sleep cycles that make the first 3 months feel like one long, endless day. The staring into the corners of the nursery at 3 o'clock in the morning, trying to brainstorm ideas for my classes as a means of finding productivity or sanity in the transitional space between night and day. Having a child strapped to me by a baby carrier or latched to my breast every 2 hours; finding an appropriate space to breastfeed where it doesn't seem like I am ashamed nor am I making a political statement ten times a day. The true anxiety of motherhood for me has been to find comfort or even acceptance of my inhabitation of the in-between space. It is the lurking on the peripheries of society in both time and space; the haunting of the corner of a brewpub, facing the wall to breastfeed or the rocking figure in the corner of the peaceful house who watches the family sleeping in the off-hours of being. How do I find a way to inhabit the living world and its peripheries simultaneously?

She wanted to tell the girl: It's complicated. I am now a person I never imagined I would be, and I don't know how to square that. I would like to be content, but instead I am stuck inside a prison of my own creation, where I torment myself endlessly, until I am left binge-eating Fig Newtons at midnight to keep from crying. I feel as though societal norms, gendered expectations, and the infuriating bluntness of biology have forced me to become this person even though I'm having a hard time parsing how, precisely, I arrived at this place. I am angry all the time. I would one day like to direct my own artwork toward a critique of these modern-day systems that articulates all this but my brain no longer functions as it did before the baby, and I am really dumb now. I am afraid I will never be smart or happy or thin again. I am afraid I might be turning into a dog. Instead, she said, smiling, I love it. I love being a mom.

- Rachel Yoder, *Nightbitch*

This choreographic process has been challenging as I can no longer rely on where I typically create work from: my brain. As much as I have been encouraged in the past to find the choreography in the studio and enter without too many preconceived notions about what the choreography will look like, I typically find my choreography in a daydream while going for a walk. I used to see spatial patterns, hear rhythms and anticipate how movements would feel all playing out in my head. Now, there is no room in

my head. It is filled with grocery lists, wake windows, and the dates of when my child should hit specific developmental milestones. Therefore, this choreography has to come from elsewhere; a part of my body that has grown the most through the process of becoming a mother: my gut.

Leaning into trusting my choreographic instincts means also leaning into vulnerability as a method. I tend to be a fairly private person in general but I find that this particular research requires a disintegration of that privacy. I use painful or intense feelings and memories as impetus for explorations, but I feel this vulnerability also gives authority to my point of view. Bringing honesty to this experience is a method of creating trust with the audience and a promise to un-sugarcoat the lived experience that is being a mother. Although I have created this embodied research from my own visceral understanding, I hope this work speaks to many mothers' experiences and can open the conversation around bringing home a new child to be more inclusive of the full spectrum of emotions that it prompts.

The challenge in describing the true experience of motherhood lies in the entanglement and contradictions of emotions. Often, when my dancers asked if their intentions were supposed to be scary or sad, eerie or comedic, I couldn't resist a simple "yes" as an answer. It is all of those things and they are inextricable from each other and their entanglement is the experience of motherhood. Motherhood is a constant barrage of emotions, information, and constant identity paradigm shifts that leave us scattered and overwhelmed. It is the feeling of always having so many thoughts competing for our attention that we never fully experience any of it. Recently, I heard someone describe why you should be glad the first time your child lies to you. They explained that between the ages of 2-3 years old, children acquire the ability to lie. To do this, they develop the ability to hold two concurrent versions of the story simultaneously: the truth and the lie. Therefore, by the time one becomes a mother, we have the capacity to hold multiple emotional truths of a situation, but we have learned that this is not the narrative of motherhood people expect from us.

Through this choreographic process, I found that my method of directing my dancers through their movements changed. Toward the beginning of the process, I was interested in oscillating between extremes; what are the physical and emotional limits of the body, as I felt I had been pushed towards as a mother. However, as the process continued, I found the most resonance in the bleeding of the extreme states. The concurrent holding of joy, anger and anxiety feel much more authentic and familiar to my experience of motherhood as opposed to parsing them out as separate entities. We tend to support statements in extremes, because when injus-

tices or grievances are explained in extreme and definitive terms, the solutions seem simple and clear. But this is rarely the case. My aesthetic for this piece lay in extremes in both directions simultaneously, which is unnerving to watch and often to experience as a performer in the piece; to physically express joy and anxiety and anger simultaneously is outside our bodily vernacular. We find it more socially acceptable to express a singular, uncomplicated narrative of how we are existing in any moment, and this tends towards contentment in public spheres. But for me, this is not reflective of the experience of my internal world in early motherhood. It contains contradictions, debates, and resides in more than one deeply felt state at a time. When creating this work, that is what I found as the most honest visceral connection to my experience of mothering; this indescribable entanglement of intense experience that can only be understood through embodiment.

In one moment in the work, the piece comes to a grinding halt as one of the dancers, Jordyn, outstretches her arms towards the downstage corner as if to reach for her child just out of the audiences' view. I wanted



Pictured: Jordyn Gibson
Photo by Fred Zwicky
From Dance at Illinois' Studio Dance 2023

her to tap into the feeling of the moment when your child does something mundane that is simultaneously extraordinarily beautiful. Describing this moment verbally does not do it justice. It has to be understood through the wash of contentment and excitement when it occurs.

In an attempt to help Jordyn access this, I sent her my son's "highlight reel" of his first year of life. It was a video composite of clips of some of his early smiles, laughs, steps, and dance moves that best encapsulate this feeling. Most of the time, he's not doing anything particularly amazing. Most of the time, we failed to even capture his "firsts" of these occasions on camera. Instead, this highlight reel contains videos that are taken in moments of pure awe; we're sitting outside in the grass and looking at flowers, or chasing each other and squealing around the house. These were the moments of "I want to remember this. Through the blur, I

have to remember this.” Jordyn was able to take this information and turn it into one of my favorite moments in the piece. It becomes the much needed breath and moment of levity that disrupts the building momentum of dread. It is not that the dread or negative emotions were extracted in this moment. On the contrary, many viewers did not read this moment as any sort of relief at all. But it is the expression of extreme joy with the haunted lingering of extreme dread that makes this moment so poignant for me.

We have a difficult time defining motherhood as nothing seems to quite encompass the complexity of its haunting nature. We allow people outside of the world of motherhood²¹ to narrowly define mothers as saint or monster. Even Eve Tuck’s definition of “Mother” is stricken through, implying that it was an idea with some weight to it but also not fit to print. We hold space only for praise and blame of our mothers, but the truth is that it is far more difficult to make room for all of the humanity that our mothers hold. In the forming and cultivating of new life, we reach to both the past, present and future simultaneously.

Much of my present concept of motherhood rests in my understanding of how my mother raised me, and much of my hope for my child’s future affects my behavior in my day-to-day living. These loving and smothering arms that reach through time span back generations and into the unknown extents of the future, never fully grasping a concrete answer to the eternal question that eternally haunts me: “Am I doing this right?” Although these monsters are not of our sole creation, they are the company we are doomed to keep. How do we find comfort in their company in the middle of the night, or in the infinitesimal space between baby and nipple? I attempt to make friends with the rage, guilt, and unmet expectations that peer at me from under my son’s crib across the room, as we all snuggle into the twilight together.

²¹ Especially old, white male authors of the classic, Americana fiction canon

Epilogue

As I write this, it has been 574 days since my son's birth. My son has some sort of plague he contracted from daycare again and he was up every 2 hours last night. I'm still tired, and yet I don't feel the same rage I once did. I feel there is a terrifying acceptance of the person I have become. I am no longer the person I was before having my son, but the monster that emerged immediately after his birth lies dormant for the time being. The moments of joy with my son are more frequent; having dance parties in the living room and attending objectively ridiculous parent and tot gymnastics classes bring us both lots of giggles and joy. I feel less on the precipice of total disintegration on a daily basis and most days, I can even keep my mind from frantically racing from worst case scenario to worst case scenario. I am more capable of being still and present in a moment than I was even just a few months ago. I am able to model more human-like behavior than I could when I began this project.

And yet I know that the monster isn't gone. It lies sleeping in a newly constructed corner of my mind. I can see it lingering in the photos taken of me and my son a year ago, and I know it's never far away. It may never go away completely. It is not a satisfying ending a reader or an audience member might hope for, but it is the honest one.

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