



## ‘Visceral Bodies’ Special Issue Editorial

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“The impulse to enter, with other humans, through language, into the order and disorder of the world, is poetic at its root as surely as it is political at its root. Poetry and politics both have to do with description and with power. And so, of course, does science. We might hope to find the three activities – poetry, science, politics – triangulated, with extraordinary electrical exchanges moving from each to each and through our lives. Instead, over centuries, they have become separated.”

Adrienne Rich, *Woman and Bird*, in *Essential Essays: Culture, Politics, and the Art of Poetry*

“[T]he body *in extremis* – the body experiencing itself acutely as a body – is a human reality to which mothers cannot help but have access, although once again they are expected to put a lid on it, to make everything sweet and nice. They can, they must, love, hold, cuddle their babies, but on condition of warding off the danger of any spillages – blood, guts, misery and lust. Their task is to prevent such intensities from going too far, to clean out the drains, on behalf of everyone. [...] So how to tell the tales of love of and for mothers? Or, how to listen to the tales that mothers choose to tell?”

Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers*

It is often assumed that questions regarding the bodily dimension of human life have primarily to do with biological or medical inquiries and are not central in the field of humanities. Over time, this has resulted in topics such as motherhood, sexuality, and reproduction being excluded from the philosophical and political landscape. Feminist, post-colonial, and other critical theories, meanwhile, have offered perspectives that deconstruct disembodied notions of subjectivity and thematise corporeality in relation to questions of normativity, identity and political visibility.

In 2023 Anna Argirò and Anna Brook organised a two-day, transdisciplinary symposium with the aim of exploring how renewed attention to the human body, and particularly those bodies othered by patriarchal norms, in philosophy, politics, literature and psychosocial studies has paved the way for a rethinking of motherhood, reproductive loss, disability and death beyond biological categories. We asked, how does this reflection contribute to naming, elaborating, and making visible concrete aspects of human life in their connection to gender, race, sexuality? What new insights can be gained by attending to bodies and embodied events and practices that are experienced viscerally?

The symposium brought together practitioners (artists, writers, poets, dancers, academics) whose work engages questions of representing the “visceral body.” Dictionary definitions of “visceral” cluster around two distinct meanings. The oldest known usage of the term, dating back to the 16th century, has it refer to something

felt in or related to internal organs of the body; in a more specific sense, to the viscera. In a more literary way, “visceral” names something related to intense, embodied emotions. Both senses of visceral certainly pertain to embodied experiences of sexuality and reproduction, as mentioned above, long and by large excluded from canonical philosophical and political discourse. The Symposium, and by extension this Special Issue as one of its outcomes, aim to engage both meanings of “the visceral”, especially as they pertain to corporealities most often marginalised or excluded from dominant epistemic frameworks and canons of thought.

Diverse as they were in style, genre, and thematic focus, the works brought together in the Symposium all engaged the question of what happens when we attempt to give voice to experiences and events that are perceived in specific cultural frameworks as being by their nature graphic, shocking, bloody, illicit... How do we navigate, through writing, dancing, making and theoretical reflection, the possible ‘horror’ or embarrassment of the subjects, but also the joys and pleasures that may arise in undergoing these experiences? How do we share real and even brutal experiences without them becoming sensational or shocking in a way that negates their complexity? What kind of literary forms, what genres of enunciation, what kinds of language do we turn to in our attempts to give voice and do justice to these experiences? Our aim in convening the symposium was not to make these experiences palatable; rather, we wanted to engage in and reflect upon the battle to make them communicable at all.

This Special Issue of *Studies in the Maternal*, edited by Anna Argirò, Anna Brook and Katja Čičigoy, builds on the work of the symposium, with many of the original contributors developing their presentations into contributions to the issue. Our network of practitioners and academics also grew as a result of the symposium, so that we were able to follow growing strands of connection and invite new contributions as well.

The Special Issue features philosophical reflections on birth and maternity in relation to language, human rights and obstetric violence (Stella Villarme), birth privilege as white privilege (Jennifer Scuro) and Hannah Arendt’s notion of ‘natality’ (Anna Argirò). It includes three poetic contributions (Anna Brook, Rachel Long and Emma Filtness) that speak to the complexity of motherhood, including through ideas of haunting, repetition, play, the body, nature and care. Sally Butcher offers visual artworks that combine language and materiality in order to re-imagine (in)fertile embodiment, while Ruchika Wason Singh centres her works on paper around maternal loss as a representation of communal violence. The topics of child loss and abortion are explored by Anna McFarlane in an autoethnographic piece that combines autobiography, science fiction and horror narratives. In between theory, autoethnography, creative writing and visual artwork, Nicola Field’s piece brings together class-based Marxist

analysis with subjective experience and family memory to explore intergenerational trauma. Critical theory and performance arts are merged together in Julia Pond's piece, which exposes the ambiguities of maternal experience and suspended temporalities through bread dough. Finally, the Special Issue features a short art film by Charlotte Warne Thomas that explores links between 'motherload', the invisible labour of familial caring, nurturing and the concepts of emotional labour and cognitive labour.

We see this Special Issue, which spans visual artworks, poetry, philosophical papers and many pieces that defy neat definition, as a continuation of an essential conversation: the strengthening of an interdisciplinary network centred around thinking about and giving expression to 'visceral bodies'. The issue is thus also, and importantly, a kind of archive of attempts to voice the unspeakable.

We would like to thank Lisa Baraitser and Sigal Spigel for giving us the opportunity of publishing this Special Issue, and Nicole Miglio for her collaboration in the early stages of the editorial process. This Special Issue is the first since the Anniversary Issue of *Studies in the Maternal* in 2020 that marked its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. 2020–2024 were the 'pandemic years' which put enormous pressures on mothers globally, but also put the journal temporarily on hold. We are delighted to be part of the re-launch of the journal and excited to see the next stage of its development.

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**Competing Interests**

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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