



(M)other Matters: An exploration of disenfranchised grief, stillbirth and maternal identity through an embodied practice

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This paper outlines the foundation and future direction of an initiative to co-create a working research group, '(M)other Matters', for bereaved mothers who are also artists and researchers, building on my art practice and research in this area. Through an exploration of lived experience, creative practice and theoretical engagement with maternal subjectivity, the project aims to create the conditions under which grief, motherhood and identity can be expressed and shared.



Introduction: Into the Earth

Did I tell you about the day I went into the earth?

It was obvious what I should do next. No hesitation. No doubt.

I sat, lay down, put my mouth to the ground, and felt my hands move over the earth. The slight give of the surface told me that my touch didn't end at this border.

Stroke, poke, press, press into, go under, go inside – just a tiny bit. Just a fingertip. Then a bit more. The temperature changed. The air shifted. Dry became moist. Hard became soft. I reached the length of my fingers, then hand, forearm, shoulder. And then it was easy. I slipped inside, and the familiar world dissolved.

I wasn't alone. Beneath the surface, the earth folded around me like a second skin. Things were whispered; slowly, gently, at just the right rhythm. A distant giggle, murmured sighs – joy and judgment intertwined in an otherworldly chorus as I descended.

And so it began. Figure 1.



Figure 1: Helen Acklam, *I slipped inside*, soil, Gelliron Cemetery, 2022.

Origins of the Research

Before outlining my plans to establish '(M)other Matters', a working research group for bereaved mothers who are also artists and researchers, I feel it is important to situate this project within the context of my on-going research and practice. This work has grown from a sustained exploration of maternal loss, grief and identity, shaped by the stillbirth of my daughter, Gail, in 1972, when I was sixteen.

My grandparents had moved to the Garw Valley in search of work when mining took over the valleys of South Wales. My parents were both teachers, my father a Chapel deacon and lay preacher, and very respected in the community. It was shocking and shameful for everyone when I found out I was pregnant at fifteen. I didn't see or hold Gail, the midwife deciding it was 'for the best'. My father 'took care of things' and only the men attended the funeral. When I came out of hospital the baby things I'd bought had been cleared away, leaving only silence.

I began working with a grief counsellor in 2020 and visited Gail's grave for the first time, a little while later. I immediately felt an overwhelming need to connect bodily with this rectangle of soil. Placing myself within the work marked a fundamental shift in my practice, which had been primarily painting-based, to an embodied and haptic engagement with the earth. Eighteen months later I obtained public funding from Arts Council England to develop my practice, with the support of two mentors, and collaborated with Dr. Lesel Dawson (Associate Professor of Literature and Culture, University of Bristol) and Dr. Julian Brigstocke (Cultural Geographer, Cardiff University) to develop an interdisciplinary research project funded by the Brigstow Institute (University of Bristol).

The practice support enabled me to spend time, on site and in my studio, with the unedited flow of responses emerging through my body and the earth, without the need for an outcome. The research support, and particularly the intimacy and openness that developed within the collaboration, enabled me to talk to and from emotionally complex and muddled experiences, and find a space in which others could participate. This combination enabled me to find a bodily understanding of unexpressed feelings, a voice to share these processes and insights, and to ongoingly explore what it means to live as a mother without children.

The research collaboration, to explore the relationship between grief, creativity, memory and place, through a lived experiential perspective, resulted in a public facing document (Dawson, L., Acklam, H., Brigstocke J., 2022). In a subsequent article, Dawson (2026) argues that my artworks offer a multilayered and multitemporal 'counternarrative about pregnancy and loss', that holds and communicates 'the ambiguity of grief'. The cross-fertilisation of ideas and methodologies, fostered via

workshops and presentations with academics and researchers during this project, equipped me to lead workshops for artists, researchers and women's groups, and present ongoing work and research at universities, arts organisations and symposiums. This in turn opened doors to new networks and routes for pursuing my research interests; challenging the silence surrounding maternal grief, the stigma of stillbirth and understanding the space I occupy today as a mother without living children.

Context: Abjection and Erasure

The bodily knowledge of loss and abjection I believe I'd always felt, was contextualised when I discovered I was adopted at the age of fourteen. Pregnant at fifteen, I drifted further into this space of 'other' by the swelling of my monstrous teenage body; following the connection that Julia Kristeva made between the maternal body and abjection, and theories of the monstrous maternal in feminist philosophy (Betterton, R., 2006). Everyone in my immediate community, school, family, friends, looked away from my expanding body and the threat it posed to the purity, order and structure of this tightly knit, religious and patriarchal community (Douglas, M., 2002, p.115). With that turn away came the loss of any possible celebration and anticipation shared with family and friends. Instead, awkwardness and shame, and attitudes that distorted my experience and feelings. These are the intangible losses that go along with being stigmatised and marginalised, that contribute to the suppression of feelings, including grief (Buerger, S., 2017).

I went into hospital alone for the birth of my daughter. Everyone involved in the clinical, clipped-tone environment assumed the right to access my body and make decisions for me, reinforcing my sense of shame and powerlessness. In a few short months I had gone from being-child to with-child, to without-child. Elaine Tuttle Hansen (1997, p. 235), on the concept of the mother without child, describes this figure as 'an embodiment of paradox: it is both one thing - a mother - and another - a not-mother' - a monstrous contradiction.

Embodied Methodologies

In her book 'Art Monsters: Unruly Bodies in Feminist Art', Lauren Elkin uses 'monster' as a verb: to monster is to disrupt, undo, rewrite internalised feelings, stories, expectations. Working within an embodied practice is integral both to challenging and rewriting internalised narratives, and to exploration of motherhood and unexpressed grief as lived, embodied experience. Judith Butler described this grief as 'prohibited' (McIvor, D., 2012, p.416), while Kenneth Doka describes it as 'disenfranchised' - 'the grief experienced from losses not openly acknowledged or socially sanctioned' (Doka, K., 1989, p.4).

I had no idea what I would do or how I would respond when I returned to the Garw Valley and found my daughter's grave. I had very little memory of my adolescent years, or sense of the 'I' I once was, and no desire to retrace the past. Yet I knew, when I saw this rectangle of land, that all I needed was there. I returned with a bag and spade.

Back in my studio, I sorted and cleaned, sieved and strained, and documented everything. One night, I watched as the dry earthy materials, changed by adding liquid medium, began to ooze and misbehave, and I stepped into the work. I felt relief as the cold concoctions of pigmented soil and coal met my skin, and slippery sensations began bubbling up through soil and body **Figure 2**. It was 'an unfolding of thought, charged with emotion' (Boyd, C., 2017, p.57).



Figure 2: Helen Acklam, *material witness*, video still, body, coal and soil pigments, 2022.

Spending time later, listening and being with the documentation and forms that emerged on site and in my studio, helped me bring together process and affects **Figure 3**. Dripping sacs of wet clay in old pillowslips and stockings, became pregnant bellies and leaking breasts **Figure 4**; the tangible objects they produced becoming forms I could see and hold **Figure 5**, that told the story of the soil as well as my own. Ground coal, suspended in medium, bleeding across stretch-marked skin, echoed the faultlines in spoil tips that I saw every day as I travelled to school **Figure 6**. I was learning to listen and notice the moments when the materials shaped the meaning **Figure 7**. This interplay of



Figure 3: Helen Acklam, *bellies and breasts*, pillow slips, washed soil, 2022.



Figure 4: Helen Acklam, *membrane*, soil, nylon stocking, 2022.



Figure 5: Helen Acklam, *forms*, fired and unfired wild clay, 2023.

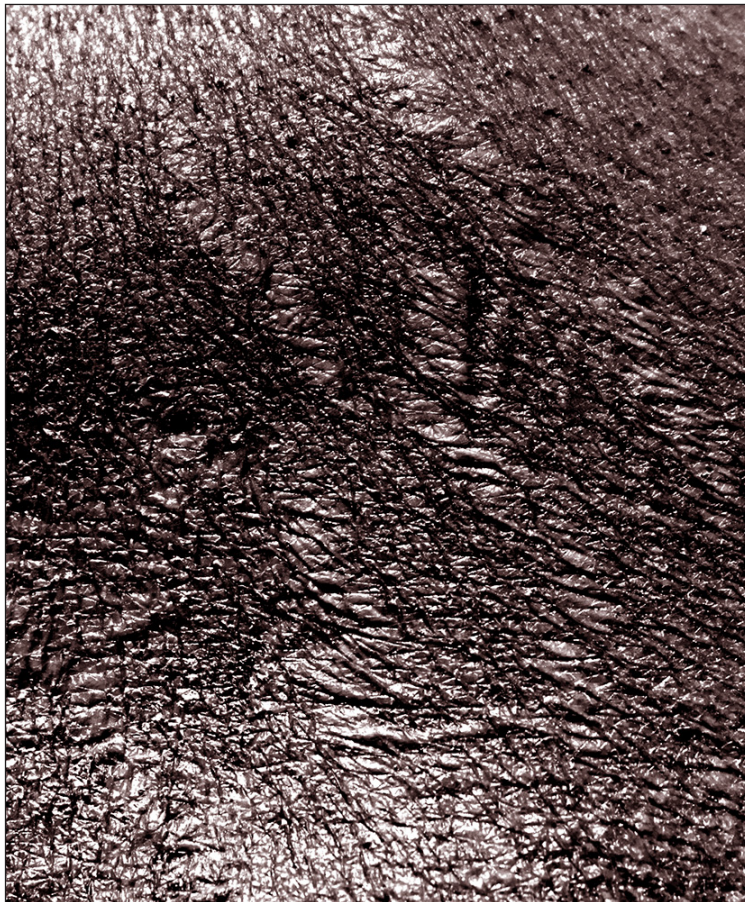


Figure 6: Helen Acklam, *faultlines*, coal pigment and medium on skin 2023.

external and internal worlds offered ways of working with the enmeshment of past and present feelings without needing to return to the past. As Karen Barad (2007, p. 136) observes, “Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating”. **Figure 8** Lauren Fournier



Figure 7: Helen Acklam, *unearthed*, soil, 2022.



Figure 8: Helen Acklam, *union*, video still, body, coal and soil pigments, soil and muslin sac.

describes this space of experience ‘not as an unquestioned zone of personal truth to which one retreats, but a site of becoming, of subject formation – it is an ongoing process that produces the conditions of possibility for recognition, understanding and difference’ (Fournier, L., 2022, p.68).

This intertwining of material, process and thought, which has become a methodology for my practice, is also, in Ai Weiwei’s words, a means of ‘unlearning by which received wisdom may be picked apart and challenged’ (McAllister, D., 2025, p.73). The following section identifies areas I propose to pick apart and challenge, and to develop in dialogue with others through the working research group. I will next outline the areas of inquiry that will shape my practice and research within the group.

Areas of Inquiry

a) Maternal Identity: is a mother a mother without her child?

The death of my second daughter, Stephanie, deepened and compounded every complex layer of grief and loss within me. Consumed by this grief, I didn’t notice the loss of my identity as a mother for a long time, but gradually I began to feel the absence of the maternal space I’d instinctually folded into and spiralled out from for 24 years. A space ‘lived and experienced as an embodied subject and, hence, further complicated by perspective – it is correlated with the ability to find oneself within it in order to perceive it’ (Boyd, C., 2017, p.39).

Language doesn’t do justice to the restlessness of questions stirring beneath my question of maternal identity. The only possible path for these vital parts of being that ripple within me, is through my body and my art practice – and borrowing the words of others.

History, love, violence, time, work, desire inscribe it in my body. I go where the fundamental language is spoken, the body language into which all tongues of things, acts, and beings translate themselves, in my own breast, the whole of reality worked upon in my flesh, intercepted by my nerves, by my senses, by the labour of all my cells, projected, analysed, recomposed into. (Cixous, H., 1991, p.52).

Cixous articulates her experiences within a writing practice; mine emerge through my collaboration with materials.

This continuous entanglement of life, practice and identity resonates with broader understandings of motherhood. The edited collection ‘Mothers Without their Children,’ highlights overlooked aspects of maternal experience and identity, with the editors

pointing out that mothering is ‘the most relational of all identities, with intersubjective effects that ripple out into all other relationships and identities’ (Beyer, C., Robertson, A., 2019,15).

What happens to the embodied maternal, to the instinctual and learnt awareness of being a mother within the vast range of what it means to be a mother, when you no longer find yourself within motherhood? What happens to a mother’s identity and place in the world without the child that defines her? How does that affect all her relationships, and their identities?

b) The Role of Language

In ‘Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection’, Julia Kristeva explores how subjectivity is constituted through negation – by what is abjected or never brought into consciousness. The absence of an English or Welsh word for a mother who has lost a child can be read as a linguistic abjection, where a maternal identity marked by loss is rendered unspeakable. By contrast, German (Verwaiste Mutter, literally ‘orphaned mother’), Arabic (Thakla), and Chinese (Shidu) each name this condition and acknowledge the identity. Just as language shapes the boundaries of perception, my embodied practice functions as an alternative affective vocabulary; a material syntax through which maternal grief and identity may be expressed.

Does the absence of language affect the experience of mothers who have lost children? What impact might new forms of language have for mothers, both with and without children?

c) Stigma

According to Tommy’s, a charity dedicated to preventing pregnancy loss, 1 in every 250 births in the UK ends in a stillbirth. A very recent study, led by the University of Bristol and funded by Tommy’s, has confirmed that the risk is significantly higher for black and ethnic minorities (7.1 per 1000) and those living in socioeconomically deprived areas (4.7 per 1000). Teenage pregnancies are disproportionately concentrated in deprived areas (C. Andrews, A. Pade, F. Boyle, et al., 2025).

Despite its prevalence, stillbirth remains highly stigmatised, shaped by the high societal value placed on motherhood and the perceived threat such loss poses to maternal identity and safety. The impact is profound: The Nuffield Trust estimate that 4.2 million women are living with depression linked to stillbirth (Tommy’s). Parents, caught up in the traumatic and distressing experience of stillbirth, can feel pressure to comply with community norms and feel responsible for the reaction of others. This can result in the silencing of their own grief, and the internalisation of stigma as

self-policing and shame, with long-lasting psychological and social consequences for mothers and their families (Nuffield Trust Research, 2023).

Building on established work on stigma and internalised shame, I am interested in investigating the subtle ways in which dynamics operate in seemingly benign contexts, ideally foregrounding lived experience and collective reflection. For example, the silencing of women and mothers by other mothers where ideas of motherhood may inadvertently perpetuate harm.

Within the research group, I will investigate how artistic research and collaboration can create affective spaces for identifying and articulating experiences of external and internalised stigma. I will also consider the social and political value of this work, both for wider audiences and for those with lived experience.

d) The Impact of Disclosure

I am very aware of the difficulties of navigating social life after loss, and deeply interested in how to ensure my experiences, and the languages I choose to talk about them, are communicable within different environments. I struggle to know how to respond to seemingly simple questions like, ‘Do you have children?’ If I say no, I deny the lives of both my daughters and our history. If I tell the truth, I am often met with awkward silences or the swift end of a conversation. Assessing when, how much and what to say is complicated. Walking the public/private tight rope within the art world is complicated.

My future research will draw on insights from other discourses, particularly where stigma and lived experiences intersect e.g. Time to Change Wales, a Welsh Government initiative addressing poverty stigma, and Darren McGarvey’s ‘Trauma Industrial Complex’. These perspectives raise crucial questions about who benefits from the disclosure of lived experience and how safeguards could ensure that, within the sharing of maternal loss, it is the mother, first and foremost, who gains value.

The nature of my practice-led research isn’t linear or logical. There’s no clear line between ongoing embodied thinking, the growth of self-awareness and the awakening of new questions that spill into what, for now, is ‘future research’. Much of what I will come to understand has already found its way into form. The work almost always precedes my understanding, and only later, sometimes much later, do I recognise why it came about and what it means.

Recently my attention shifted from the earth of the valley floor to the high ridges that define it. Instead of the lush greenness I expected, I found rocky outcrops, unforgiving to walk on. As I bent my body around their gnarly forms, I became drawn to the animated world between them **Figure 9**. Looking for a material I could be in process

with to make these spaces tangible, led me to glass. The meeting of these two complex materials - resisting, shattering and eventually settling together **Figure 10** - evoked a belonging through relationship that echoes across my research and that I now wish to nurture with other women who share this lived experience.



Figure 9: Helen Acklam, *threshold*, carboniferous rock, body, 2024.



Figure 10: Helen Acklam, *out of place*, carboniferous rock, glass, steel stand, 2025.

Proposed Initiative: Co-create a Working Research Group, (M)other Matters

The story of the mother without child ‘brings us closer to that frequently stated goal of feminist study: seeing points of view more fully, hearing maternal voices more clearly and variously, understanding maternal subjectivity more deeply and complexly’ (Tuttle Hansen, E.,1997, p.20).

In 2023, I participated in an international project with twelve artists exploring personal loss through our arts practice, which for me is thinking with my hands. Over eight months we created new work while meeting regularly online to share experiences, ideas and the deeply personal and unique ways we were each navigating the ‘swampy lowlands’ (Schön, D 1987, p.42); the visceral spaces where the senses become a means of making sense. This was an intense, supportive and transformative experience through which I developed deeper understandings of loss and grief and identified the questions I wanted to explore through practice-based research.

Building on this experience, I now plan to co-create a Working Research Group for mothers and artists (of any practice) who have lost children to explore what it means to live with, in, into, alongside the complex affects of (m)othering as mothers without children.

Framework: (M)other Matters - An International Working Research Group

The group will be selected by a panel, following an international open call, and will encourage a diverse range of practices. This will bring together artist mothers, who have experienced child loss, to co-create a safe, supportive and democratic space for dialogue, research and the expression of new work. It will be nurturing and generative, culminating in a public outcome shaped by the diverse practices, ideas and work that emerges.

Over a 12-month programme, 10–12 artists will meet monthly online. Sessions will balance support with critical reflection and incorporate individual check-ins, presentations, discussion and reflection, research and next steps. Guest contributors may be invited. Through this process, members will develop new work that will lead to exhibition(s), partnerships, publications, presentations and symposiums. Potential avenues for financial support will include Arts Councils, university partnerships, charitable foundations and health organisations, ensuring the group can sustain its work and extend its reach.

In this way, M(Other) Matters seeks not only to create a structure of support and collaboration, but also to open new ways of thinking, making and being together in the aftermath of loss. The group offers the possibility that, through shared artistic practice and research, experiences of mothering and living with loss can be reimagined as sources of knowledge, resilience and creative transformation.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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