



Decolonising Maternity – Artists and Academics in New Delhi and Brighton Creating Work on Experiences of Maternity

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In the autumn of 2021, the Centre for Arts and Wellbeing, University of Brighton, funded a symposium led by myself Jess Moriarty and Kate Aughterson, called, Performing Maternities. The conference was a magical space where we laughed and cried over collective and individual experiences, and also the work on maternity – critical and creative – that the people taking part had produced. Creative practice informed by getting pregnant, not getting pregnant, having a baby, not having a baby, and the real and imagined stories that these times inspired meant that the event was rich and full, surprising and relatable.

Part of the discussions at the event were focused on the challenges associated with maternity and particularly for people from marginalised and underserved communities. A key question arising from the event was: How can creative methods develop understanding and decolonise maternity? In this article, the authors, Jess Moriarty and Ruchika Wason Singh, discuss our response to this question via a recorded conversation and provide insights into our creative and critical work.



Background to the Decolonising Maternity Project

In the autumn of 2021, the Centre for Arts and Wellbeing, University of Brighton, funded a symposium led by myself (Jess) and Kate Aughterson, called, *Performing Maternities*. The conference was a magical space where we laughed and cried over collective and individual experiences, and also the work on maternity – critical and creative – that the people taking part had produced. Creative practice informed by getting pregnant, not getting pregnant, having a baby, not having a baby, and the real and imagined stories that these times inspired meant that the event was rich and full, surprising and relatable.

When we spoke of maternal, we wanted to be far reaching and inclusive, acknowledging that,

Our world of birth mothers, egg-mothers, adoptive mothers, lesbian mothers, queer mothers, trans mothers, foster mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, mothers without children, mothers with students, othermothers has been transformed by a combination of technology and social change – we have extended the term maternal to mean so much more than a bearing and nurturing body – and a good thing too. (Aughterson and Moriarty, 2024, p.3)

Part of the discussions at the event were focused on the challenges associated with maternity and particularly for people from marginalised and underserved communities. A key question arising from the event was: *How can creative methods develop understanding and decolonise maternity?*

Ruchika Wason Singh (artist and academic, India) was one of the presenters at the conference, speaking about the artwork she had devised by drawing on maternity and nature: ‘Wason Singh’s work resonates internationally and locally and allows the viewer/reader to contemplate simultaneously the familiarity and the otherness of ours and others’ bodies in the world.’ (Ibid, p.12). In post-conference chats, via email and on Instagram, Ruchika and I came to develop the Decolonising Maternities project as a way of bringing the work of artists in India into the University of Brighton, extending the network of artists and academics that the event had started, and giving us time to think about how this work might motivate conversations and engender social change around maternity across the world.

The Centre for Arts and Wellbeing at the University of Brighton funded a further small-scale transdisciplinary project led by Ruchika and I, that aimed to engage mothers,

artists, and researchers in India, in a series of dialogues about lived experiences with the potential to challenge negative and reductive discourse about motherhood and celebrate and value diverse stories of maternity. In the UK, Asian women are twice as likely to die in childbirth than white women and Black women are four times as likely (Williams, 2022) and yet there is a paucity of knowledge and understanding about the lived experiences of maternity from members of the global majority in the UK. *How the arts can raise awareness about experiences of maternity* was another key question Ruchika and I wanted to explore, and we commissioned 2 artists, Vasudha Thozhur and Tanujaa Rane Hambardikar, in India to devise work that responded to the dialogues that are shared here as part of our dissemination.

Vasudha Thozhur studied at the College of Arts and Crafts, Madras, and at the School of Art and Design in Croydon, UK. Her practice is interdisciplinary but primarily rooted in painting. She is a Professor in the Department of Art and Performing Arts at Shiv Nadar University.



Vasudha Thozhur, Untitled, Part of a triptych 37" × 51" Screen printing fabric, polythene scraps with inscriptions, woolen thread 2023.

Tanujaa Rane Hambardikar is a printmaker who has participated in several group exhibitions in India and overseas along with participations in several international print Biennials and works. She lives and works in Mumbai.



Tanuja Rane Hambardikar, Twenty-two stitches (tryptch), 10" × 12", Etching, 2006.

Through the project we wanted to promote knowledge exchange and to use creative methods to respond to the real-world global challenges facing people navigating maternity. There was a shared intention to produce work that was sustainable and in the spirit of social change.

Our work – Ruchika and Jess – is concerned with sharing stories of maternity including the experience of birthing; and parenting; the continued identity we might have after we have finished, or when we wish we might, parent; the metaphors we associate with cultural and ideological values associated with caring and/or with the physical act of bearing children; the ethics of ‘interruption’ and caring (Baraitser, 2008) which infuse our social and emotional lives. We now want to identify other work seeking to decolonise research in this area, and also decentre heteronormative/white experiences, by establishing a methodological approach – collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013). We aim to use our research and practice to celebrate diverse stories of maternity and consider how artists can contribute to healthcare research that might ensure fewer people from the global majority die.



Online Project Meeting, (clockwise, top left to right) Jessica Moriarty, Ruchika Wason Singh, Tanuja Rane Hambardikar & Vasudha Thozur, 2023.

A Discussion of Next Steps

Ruchika – I thought we might begin by introducing ourselves and our practice. I am Ruchika a visual artist, independent researcher and a visiting professor at Ashoka University. My art practice is interdisciplinary, encompassing matricentric research, studio-based work, activism, and, more recently, performance. In 2016, I initiated the project A.M.M.A.A. - The Archive for Mapping Mother Artists in Asia, a project focused on the intersection of motherhood and art-making, addressing a lacuna in the structural spaces of support for mother artists within the art ecosystem. I identify myself as a mother and an inhabitant. These roles are interdependent and come together, in part or whole, as I create paintings, reach out to local and global communities, and reflect upon the existential questions of life.

Jess – And I am Jess, Principal Lecturer at the University of Brighton where I am course leader on the Creative Writing MA. My research focuses on autoethnography, community practice, wellbeing and creative methods. My latest book – with the artist Christina Reading – for Bloomsbury is out later this year and entitled: *The Art of Collaborative Autoethnography: creative conversations that can change the world*.

Ruchika – As we plan to extend our network to include midwives, academics and artists from the UK and India, I thought we could discuss our autoethnographic approach. Can you tell me more about your work in autoethnography to start us off?

Jess – In previous work, (Moriarty, 2014) I adopted an autoethnographic approach to explore my experiences of juggling maternity and academic life. I problematized the feeling of always getting it wrong and never quite being present in either role. This theme is evident in other work I have published, including a chapter where I story myself as a Greek goddess who is similarly unsure about her competing identities (Marr and Moriarty, 2021). In this piece, I argue that the process of collaborating with a colleague and sharing stories helped me to feel more confident in myself as a researcher, writer, teacher, mother and it is this ethos that motivated the projects I have been lucky enough to develop with you, Ruchika. I am interested in research methodologies such as autoethnography as a way of drawing stories from underrepresented groups and communities into academia instead of reducing them to data. How can art – image and text – centre and celebrate lived experience?

Ruchika – In my collaborations with you, the interdisciplinary nature of art, or rather art practice has been at work. I see the process of collaboration aligning with my approach to art practice as an expanded domain rather than studio practice alone. This desire to branch out to develop conversations, ideas and share experiences for growth, has been a key component in our collaborative work. So, autoethnography, motherhood, storytelling and image and text have been keywords in our collaborations. What I also find important is that across different disciplines, human expressions can be defined or contextualised in specific ways. When writing or narrating a personal story can be uniquely defined as an autoethnographic act, it immediately transports me into a domain that is new. I am intrigued by the new ways of seeing, the new windows that will open up for me. At the same time, the idea of image and text (written or spoken word) rather than only the visual (as in the practice of visual art), brought in the element of talking and sharing whilst almost spontaneously creating safe spaces for conversations.

Jess – I am interested in what you have to say about autoethnography here Ruchika. At best, autoethnography can offer a way of valuing creative work – image and text – as equal to traditional academic work and in this way, it is supposed to be more inclusive and democratic than other research methodologies. For me, autoethnography enables me to co-author academic texts with artists and community partners as we can use their life writing and their practice in any work we publish together (see Moriarty and McNally and Moriarty, 2024; Kalume and Moriarty, 2023; Whittle and Moriarty, 2023; for examples). This helps to navigate potential hierarchies that are synonymous with conventional academic work – rather than me researching about, or for my collaborators, we can research together – and this seems particularly important in our work where we are seeking to decolonise research about maternity. In the research that

we published after the initial symposium – where we met! – *Performing Maternities*, 2019, University of Brighton – there was a real mix of life writings using painting, performance, poetry, graphic novel, and textiles that allowed the contributors to centre their lived experiences and their art practice in an academic publication. We were overwhelmed by the number of submissions and ended up devising a book and two journals (Aughterson and Moriarty, 2024; Aughterson and Moriarty, 2022; Aughterson and Moriarty, 2022b), which was a lot of work, but there was so much fantastic practice that emerged from the symposium, and we wanted everyone to have to chance to have their work seen and validated.

What has your experience of working autoethnographically been like? What have been the positives and what are some of the challenges that might help us evolve autoethnography as an approach via the work we do together?

Ruchika – I was trained as an artist, studied art history and had always referred to the term autobiographical whilst depicting personal narratives. Working from the vantage point of autoethnography allowed the process of writing my thoughts and experiences, relating it to the drawings and sketches, and going back and forth between the two. This supported a research-oriented approach to artmaking, where I was both spontaneous and analytical. Where the text and the images produced supported each other. It challenged the accepted ways of art making where the final product called artwork is in focus.

The benefit of an autoethnographic approach in the arts is that it widens the scope for self-reflection, by letting us formulate our own methods for it. But yet, I am not an ethnographer. It is this same feeling in other participants that I think can be limiting and bring challenges. How do we make the artists bridge this gap of being an artist and borrowing from ethnography? I think for the participants to be comfortable we need to have an orientation towards autoethnography. It should be done in a way that the term is not overwhelming. The second challenge can be about privacy limits. We need to have a safe space, good faith and consent when it comes to using the data.

Jess – I think the notion of safe spaces and good faith are great but fallible. How can a space ever really be safe when we cannot be sure what a person is bringing into that space in terms of their lived and emotional experience – and equally, they cannot be 100% sure what they will be asked to do in that space? But the project we worked on together did go through an ethical process and everyone involved was asked for their consent. It was also really important to me that the artists were paid properly for their time and that we didn't rely on good faith! But I think you are right, autoethnography offers the potential for power sharing. I am currently working on a book for Bloomsbury called: *The Art of Collaborative Autoethnography: creative conversations that can change*

the world, where my co-author, Dr Chris Reading, and I explore how autoethnography can support our creative practice as a form of activism and we have interviewed several artists who identify their work – painting, film, DJ-ing, life-writing – as being made in a spirit of social justice. As part of the book, we adopted a model of autoethnography that allows for:

1. Power-sharing among research-participants
2. Enrichment in the research process (our creativity was restored)
3. Deeper learning about self and other
4. Community building (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 20013, p.25)

Our method involved walking, talking and making which we identified as political, part of a feminist methodology that Acker, Barry and Esseveld describe as work that aims to:

- Be about women and can be used by women
- Not oppress women
- Develop feminist perspectives that challenge dominant intellectual traditions (Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1991; 139)

And I wonder if this approach could be mapped onto our work or if you would suggest something more nuanced or different?

Ruchika – Certainly using different creative methods into autoethnography will make the project more layered and enable us to welcome a variety of artists into the project – who will be valued as researchers. We never know how the creative method of one artist might inspire another. This is of course dependent on when and where the project takes place.

It also causes me to consider ways in which we might document the project and how we can provide insights into our lived experiences of working together and the methods we adopt and also develop. I think it could make a rich repository for anyone wanting to know about the works and the narratives and how they might learn from our work.

In my upcoming project with Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, *Looking with the other (m) others*, I will be working with artists in different workshop modules. As a continuation of my project in Germany during the India Week Hamburg 2023 artist residency at FRISE Kunstlerhaus (Hamburg), I will develop exercises as deliberations for story sharing and community making. I am also interested in how the individual stories can develop a collective resonance.

Jess – Really looking forward to working with you Ruchika and finding out more about your practice – and about you!

Conclusion

In 2025/26 we hope to extend our online network in the UK and India, to include midwives, academics and artists from both countries, and to develop our collaborative autoethnographic approach (Kalume & Moriarty, 2022). We intend to develop a funding bid for the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), to ensure the project is sustainable, and we will disseminate our findings via an exhibition between New Delhi and Brighton. Ruchika has already contributed to an AHRC project led by Professor Lesley Murray at the University of Brighton, that explored how art can raise awareness about lived experiences with gender-based violence (Murray et al., 2022) and Ruchika's work was exhibited in the *Transensory Mobilities* exhibition in Brighton and Mexico City.

We hope our project will evolve and extend our connection and collaboration, but mainly we hope it diversifies and celebrates experiences of maternity in India, Brighton and beyond, demonstrating how the arts can and will lead to change around experiences of maternity, broadening our understanding of this term to draw in previously marginalised and invisible stories.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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