



Affect, Creativity and the Maternal Special Issue

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Editorial by the guest editors, Anna Argirò and Anna Brook, introducing the *Affect, Creativity and the Maternal* Special Issue of *Studies in the Maternal*.



As Julia Lane and Eleonora Joensuu point out in *Everyday World-Making: Towards an Understanding of Affect and Mothering*, “Mothering is filled with affective experiences that may surprise, delight, shock, and even horrify us.”¹ Lane later suggests that the lens of affect allows mothers to live with, alongside, and into experiences that may resist naming.²

Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, suggest that “There is no single, generalisable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be.”³ We can, nevertheless, find a usable, if open, definition. In an article titled *The Turn to Affect: A Critique*, Ruth Leys posits the suggestion that affects are seen as:

“inhuman,” “pre-subjective,” “visceral” forces and intensities that influence our thinking and judgments but are separate from these. Whatever else may be meant by the terms affect and emotion [...] it seems [...] that the affects must be noncognitive, corporeal processes or states.⁴

This slipperiness – the refusal of affect to be neatly contained – alongside affects’ viscosity, may be precisely what allows us to grasp the complexity of mothering.

So how might we make sense of, write, explore, or hold the complex affects of maternity? How do artists, writers, researchers and theorists attempt to capture, if not affect itself, then at least a sense of its resonance and unpredictability? Brian Massumi reminds us that our feelings “[fold] into each other, resonating together”, interacting in ways “apt to unfold again in action, often unpredictably”.⁵ This issue asks what such foldings and unfoldings look like in maternal life, and what forms of creativity might emerge when we attend to them.

The works collected here show that affect is not ancillary to maternity but integral to how it is lived, imagined, and remembered. They reveal maternity as a site of creative force, political struggle, critical thinking and relational memory – at once embodied and unstable, personal and collective.

In their dialogue on ‘Decolonising Maternity,’ Jess Moriarty and Ruchika Wason Singh explore precisely this entanglement of affect, politics, and creativity. Reflecting on the *Performing Maternities* symposium they convened in New Delhi and Brighton,

¹ Lane, J. and Joensuu, E. (2018), *Everyday World-Making: Towards an Understanding of Affect and Mothering*, Demeter Press, p. 1.

² Ibid., p. 78.

³ Gregg, M. and Seigworth, G. J. (2010) *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press. p. 3.

⁴ Leys, R. (2011) ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique’, *Critical Inquiry*, 37(3), pp. 434–472. p. 437.

⁵ Massumi, B. (2002), *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 1.

they ask how artistic practices might help decolonise understandings of maternity. Their exchange reminds us that affect is never experienced in isolation, but always shaped by the inequalities of race, class, and social position. Here, creativity becomes both a method and a mode of resistance: a way of making space for marginalised maternal voices and experiences that dominant narratives often silence.

Questions of embodiment and mediation are taken up in Lana Locke's 'Making (Babies),' a video essay and written reflection centred on the placenta. Locke treats this organ as both biological and symbolic, a mediating space between mother and child that is at once intimate and strange. Her practice, which moves between the domestic and the workshop, disrupts neat separations between caregiving and art-making. Affect here appears as "feral", unruly and unsettling, troubling fixed notions of maternal identity while also pointing to the creative potential hidden in the ordinary messiness of domestic life.

This sense of instability and transformation also animates Millie Walton's '52 Weeks,' part of a durational project that began during pregnancy and unfolded through daily acts of documentation and writing. Walton highlights how the temporalities of caregiving disrupt coherent narratives, producing fragments, interruptions, and absences. Affect surfaces as both disruption and creativity, pushing her work toward porous, communal forms of maternal authorship. What emerges is a language of the maternal that refuses coherence but insists on presence.

A different lens on maternal labour is offered by Holly Isard, who examines "gestational labour" as a form of affective labour. Situating her analysis within Marxist-feminist debates on social reproduction, she shows how pregnancy itself is increasingly entangled with capitalist logics of biotechnologies, surrogacy, and foetal mediation. By naming gestation as labour, Isard draws attention to its affective and intersubjective dimensions, foregrounding how both maternal and foetal subjectivities are being reshaped within global economies of reproduction. Affect here becomes a contested terrain: exploited, commodified, but also resistant.

If affect is often tied to memory, then Crystal Sam's 'Remembering Motherhood Through My Daughter's Wardrobe' beautifully demonstrates how material objects carry emotional resonance. Through clothes inherited from her mother and passed on by friends, Sam traces how textures and smells mediate intergenerational and affective bonds. Her hybrid autoethnography situates clothing as more than fabric: it becomes an archive of lived memory, of connections sustained across time, absence, and distance. In her work, affect emerges through materiality, showing how everyday objects shape and sustain maternal experience.

Similarly, Helen Acklam's '(M)other Matters' expands this exploration of affect into the terrain of disenfranchised grief and maternal identity. Through embodied artistic practice rooted in the experience of stillbirth, Acklam transforms personal loss into a form of material inquiry – working with soil, glass, and the body to uncover how grief can be both a site of rupture and creative becoming. Her project exemplifies how affect, when expressed through artistic process, can articulate what language cannot, offering a counternarrative to the silencing of maternal loss and reimagining mourning as a space of relation, transformation, and shared knowledge.

Finally, Jennifer Crouch's 'Emancipatory Monstrosity' addresses the affective dimensions of illness, infertility, and medicalised care. Drawing on her experiences of breast cancer and reduced fertility, Crouch critiques the cisheteronormative, racialised assumptions that underpin fertility treatment. Her creative practice, informed by feminist new materialisms, queer science studies, and assemblage theory, becomes a way of negotiating and resisting those assumptions. Affect here is not only pain and loss but also courage, creativity, and expansive reimagining of what it means to nurture life in the face of illness.

Taken together, these contributions highlight maternity as a field where affect and creativity are inseparable. They show how affect destabilises fixed categories – mother/child, art/domestic, coherence/fragmentation – and in doing so, opens new possibilities for thought, relation, and practice. They remind us that affect is deeply political, shaped by histories of colonialism, medicalisation, and capitalism, yet also a source of connection, empathy, and resistance.

In these deeply unsettling times, we ask: what can we learn from staying with the complexity of maternal affects? From struggling, working, fighting to understand ourselves and one another a little better? It seems to us that affect and empathy are deeply linked, and that our world is greatly in need of more of the latter. In sharing, or attempting to share, the affective complexity of our maternal experiences – including those of loss, illness, and grief – we hope to expand our capacity for recognition, relation, and response.

This special issue, then, is not only an archive of creative and critical engagements with maternity, but also an invitation: an invitation to attend to the messy, resonant, slippery affects that run through maternal life; to acknowledge their power to unsettle and to connect; and to imagine, through them, new ways of being with and alongside one another.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

