

ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION - POSITION PIECE

A Thread, a Maternal Thread

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In this paper, I briefly assess my experience as an intern at MaMSIE in 2014/15, and how it inspired me, and I summarise the main focus of my – soon to be submitted – thesis, which is an attempt to conceptualise motherhood in a collective, relational way. I follow the thread that is the story of my thesis, partially inspired by the relationship with my mother, by broadly tracing some of the themes of its chapters. I discuss how I have been influenced by Adriana's Cavarero's work and her reading of Hannah Arendt, and by Italian feminist groups from the 1970s and 1980s, especially a 1970s Roman mothers' collective. I go on to explore the work I did in 2016 with Berlin-based artist Alex Martinis Roe using a thick, colourful thread to represent motherhood in a collective, relational way.

I was very happy I was offered to do an internship for one year at *MaMSIE* between 2014 and 2015, and I loved the experience there. By then, I was a mother and a part-time PhD student. At *MaMSIE* and *Studies in the Maternal*, I collaborated with some inspirational women and men, some of whom have become long lasting friends till today. The work there inspired me in many ways, and it was exciting to see many interpretations of the maternal depicted by artists, and academic writings on motherhood collected in one space. I realised more clearly how my research topic on motherhood, was valid, and how my voice was important. My son was then 4 years old, and I was restarting to dedicate more time to my interests, studies and passions. One of these passions was the maternal: understanding motherhood, what it means to be a mother, and how my subjectivity had changed since becoming a mother. I focused all these interests into my PhD thesis, *Thinking the Maternal Collectively. A Feminist Critique of Liberal Equality and Individualism*, which centres on mothers' relationality. This thesis, attempts to conceptualise motherhood in a collective, relational way. It also tries to think how and if a relational model of motherhood, instead of an individualised model of care, can transform a mother's sense of self, her subjectivity.

The thread of the story I want to tell in this short paper takes different twists and turns through my life. The word 'thread' has many connotations, which can be symbolic and concrete. It can refer to a storyline, a sewing thread, something that links and connects, and it can represent an umbilical cord too. In both my thesis and this paper, I speak of a 'thread' as a symbolic thread. At the same time, I also speak of a concrete, thick, colourful, fabric ball of thread, which I work with in my research to represent – symbolically and concretely – mothers' relationality to build webs of support for each other. As well, I speak of a 'maternal thread' because part of my work in the thesis is biographical. My interest in the maternal threads through my childhood due to the relationship I had with my now late mother. In line with one of the most memorable slogans of 1970s feminism, I take 'the personal' to be 'political'. And in this paper, I follow the thread of the story that is my thesis and how it came into being.

The idea of a relational model of motherhood stems, among various other experiences and interests, from something my mother Bertilla told me several years ago,

which has always stayed with me. She recounted thinking, when she was 20 years old and I was just a few months old:

What am I doing alone at home with a baby? Shall I invite my friend who has a baby over and we spend time cooking, cleaning, having a coffee together instead of being alone with a baby all day? Or, one of us rests and the other looks after the babies for a bit. Then another day we go to her house and do the same.

Interestingly, at that point, my mother was not yet a feminist. Her feminist identity unfolded over many years, starting just a few months after her reflection on the motherhood experience. In the early 1970s, having been brought up in Italy in a Catholic and traditional family, she found herself asking: 'what am I doing alone at home with a baby?' This was, I think, an important and valid question that challenged conventions of the good, 'naturally' capable mother who is 'just' happy to be at home with her baby. Moreover, I take my mother's reflection to be important because I value oral history as a way to understand, in this case, feminist history and changing subjectivities. Indeed, as Italian feminist historian Luisa Passerini asserts: 'we can say that the culture of '68 in the first place has produced biographies and that those are its culture.'¹

My understanding of relationality, or relational ontology, is based mainly on the practices of Italian feminist groups from the 1970s and '80s, with whom my mother, her friends, my maternal aunts and one paternal aunt were involved. It is also influenced by Adriana Cavarero's work on relationality and her reading of Hannah Arendt's idea of plurality *in its own right*. Arendt states in *The Human Condition*²: 'Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to *the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world*' [emphasis mine]. Cavarero takes Arendt's concern with restoring plurality to the political

¹ Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation, Italy 1968*. (Hanover, New England: Wesleyan University Press, 1996). p. 206.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, First (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). p. 7.

and turns it into 'an ontology of plural uniqueness' constitutive of each existent. For her, there is no universal subject. Instead, Cavarero proposes an open, more altruistic subject—one inclined toward the other. She reminds us how, from the very start, in having been born into a condition of relational dependence on others, typically the mother, humans are primarily relational. For Cavarero, it is from this primary materialist, anti-metaphysical, relational ontology that politics should inscribe itself.

In 2010, Israeli artistic director Hofesh Shechter of Hofesh Shechter Dance Company was interviewed about his grand-scale dance piece *Political Mother*. The interviewer asked, 'So for *Political Mother*, what were your initial ideas?' To which Shechter replied,

I started to think about neediness, both in our intimate lives and also in our relationships with our country, the sense of belonging, our nationalism. There is something very needy and quite pathetic about us ... I was thinking about these emotional ties – with our parents, mother earth, our founding fathers. As I continued to think about this, the idea of connection between something political and something warm and cosy seemed impossible. But also very interesting to me. The words political and mother ... the title made me smile. These two conflicting worlds.³

On reading this interview, I was taken aback by the stereotypical image of motherhood described by Shechter. I felt that it was the direct opposite of what motherhood has the potential to be—if disengaged from a patriarchal frame. Moreover, it was completely different to how I ever conceived motherhood to be. In my thesis, I am interested in challenging the idea of motherhood that Hofesh Shechter believes to be true—that the words 'political' and 'mother' are two conflicting worlds/words. It is telling that these words made him smile, for into this smile we can read many meanings. If these words made him smile, I on the other hand, see no conflict in these words.

³ <http://hofesh.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PoliticalMother-Education-Pack-URL16July.pdf>.

To the contrary, I view motherhood and the political as linked. Maybe it is exactly the opposite of what Hofesh Shechter argues: it is because the maternal *can* be warm and cosy that *it is* political. Motherhood can bring us back to a time when we were utterly vulnerable and looked after by our mother or other primary carers. In this way, it reminds us of our connection to others, our relational existence. In Arendtian terms, then, the maternal reminds us of our political subjectivity in plurality.

Motherhood, as exemplified by Shechter's viewpoint, is often defined as apolitical. Its activity is consigned, identified and marginalised inside the space of a home, the private and the insular. Moreover, mothers are often perceived as conservative, and motherhood is often idealised and romanticised.⁴ For several years, I was interested in the potential for politics in the relationality between mothers and carers and in the intersection between motherhood and politics as a site for political resistance. I see the political aspect that links these two terms, motherhood and politics, similarly to Italian feminist jurist Lia Cigarini and Italian feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro when they say:

A different practice in which all of us women of the movement recognise ourselves, concerns stepping from the political to the un-political. That is the reason why we happily find ourselves in places which are political and not political, for example bookshops, collectives and houses. We mix political occupations with others that don't have this name like holidays, work breaks, love and friendships. We do not say that everything is political but more to the point that *everything can become political*.⁵ (my emphasis)

⁴ Among others, a book that challenges the idealised mother and the stereotypes relating to the maternal body is Jane M. Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine. Regulating the Reproductive Body*. (Hove, East Sussex: Routledge, 2006). For the silencing of the maternal in philosophy see as well Michelle Boulous Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body. Reading Silence*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁵ 'Un'altra pratica in cui tutte noi ci riconosciamo, riguarda il passaggio dal politico al non politico. Perciò noi ci troviamo volentieri in luoghi che sono e non sono politici, come librerie e circoli o case, e mescoliamo le occupazioni politiche con altre che non hanno questo nome, come le vacanze, gli intervalli del lavoro, gli amori, le amicizie. Non diciamo che tutto è politico, ma piuttosto che tutto può diventarlo.' Luisa Cigarini, Lia and Muraro, 'Politica e Pratica Politica.', *Critica Marxista*, 3–4 (1992). p. 14.

It is this idea that *everything can become political* that I link to relationality between mothers and carers. A mother's desire is to be heard and seen, in Arendtian terms and as re-elaborated in Cavarero's work, in her own uniqueness⁶ as a *who*, not as a *what*.⁷ In my view, someone who has a child in a capitalist society within often small family settings has a greater risk of having a fusional, symbiotic attachment with their child, which can impinge on the mother's ability to keep a sense of self that satisfy her.⁸ A new mother often becomes vulnerable to her changing subjectivity and, at the same time while experiencing that, she is looking after an utterly vulnerable baby. It is this *double vulnerability*, as I call it, that she needs to learn to live and cope with. Therefore, to remain a *who*, as a woman alongside being a mother, is important. For a mother to maintain a sense of individual subjectivity, each mother's story must be heard in its specificity and uniqueness.⁹ If my experience, 'my'/this story, this life, this relationship with my child/ren, are brought to the fore and acknowledged then I have the feeling that I am being listened to. Consequently, I feel more like myself, as a woman, as a subject with my own ideas, desires and dreams.

⁶ Among other work where Cavarero's discusses uniqueness, see in particular Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁷ For Adriana Cavarero, via her interpretation and elaboration of Hannah Arendt's work, a 'who' expresses the uniqueness of each of us, the uniqueness of our existence; 'this conception of the unique existent is the contrary of *what* of universal humanism, the disembodied subject of rights. It is the *who* of the unique self-possessed of her own speech, her own narrative, which she relates to another unique existent.' in Patrick Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 93.

⁸ 'I situate myself somewhere between those who privilege separation and those who highlight connection... Motherhood does contribute to a woman's individuation and, moreover, it is her sense of individuation that facilitate her capacity to separate.' Cited in Roszika Parker, *Torn in Two. The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. (London: Virago Press, 2005). p. 122; And 'feminist psychoanalysis has gone further and argued that children need that their mothers be subjects in their own rights.' cited in Wendy Hollway, 'From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity', *International Journal of Critical Psychology*, 2 (2001), 13–38., p. 2; At the same time I see differentiation from one's child as being possible and more 'successful' when arising from connection as Alison Stone has aptly argued in Alison Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity*. (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2011). p. 163–164.

⁹ 'Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves.' (Arendt, 1958, p. 4).

Following the thread that is the story of my thesis, my interest in relationality between mothers made me more curious about the mothers' collective one of my maternal aunts, Francesca, was involved with in the mid-1970s. I had always known that she was part of this Rome-based group called *Il collettivo madri* (The Mothers' Collective) and, after a while writing the thesis, I desired to know more about it. Eventually, I decided that the experiences of this collective should be a chapter in its own right. This group of about fifteen mothers met weekly mainly without their children and at times with their children. They supported each other for many decades—some are still meeting now. The mothers' collective was a space for women to discuss and elaborate their experience of motherhood and to have the time to relate with each other freely. Ironically, in the mid-1970s, this group of feminist mothers did not feel included in the wider feminist movement. In those years of radical feminist politics in Italy, where the traditional meaning of motherhood was being questioned and rejected, 'being a mother seemed to mean being a lesser feminist'.¹⁰

In the late 1970s, *Il collettivo madri* decided to take their experiences outside of their group, and they organised an art exhibition on historical pictorial and cinematic representations of mothers and motherhood. They travelled to different Italian cities and towns to go to feminist gatherings. These mothers also went on holiday together, alone and with their children. Importantly, they asked questions about their experience of motherhood, all the while being involved in the wider political protests and changes that were happening in Italy at the time. After some years of collaborating, the collective founded a study and research centre on motherhood called *Il Taccuino D'Oro*, Gruppo di studi e di ricerca sulla maternità e sulla condizione femminile.¹¹ In 1978, they organised a pioneering national conference on motherhood, *Convegno Nazionale Sulla Maternità*, in Rome at *La Casa Internazionale delle Donne*.¹²

¹⁰ Silvana Pisa, *Dall'io Al Noi* (unpublished book). Silvana Pisa is one of the members of the Roman mothers' collective.

¹¹ Il Taccuino D'Oro, Research and Study Group on Motherhood and Women's Condition.

¹² The experiences of the mother's collective were captured in this book: Angela, Cattaneo and Silvana, Pisa, *L'Altra Mamma. La Maternità Nel Movimento Delle Donne. Fantasie, Desideri, Domande e Inquietudini*. (Roma: Savelli Editori, 1979).

In 2016, the thread of the maternal story I am interested in unrolled a little further. With Berlin-based artist Alex Martinis Roe,¹³ I worked on a project called 'Ritual for the Support of Mothers and Carers'¹⁴ inspired by the themes of my thesis. Then, in 2017, based on my work with Alex, I ran a workshop in collaboration with London-based artist Rose Gibbs.¹⁵ We held this at the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths, University of London. During both workshops, I worked with a long, colourful, thick ball of thread made of fabric, which I used to symbolise mother to mother relationality. The idea of the thread to represent relationality was to render the symbolic concrete and make relationality touchable and visible. In using the thread, I created an exercise where each mother/carer would ask the person next to them what they needed help with. For example, 'can you come to my place once a week to hold my baby while I have a shower, get dressed and then we have a coffee together?' Or, 'can you come to my home with your baby, we clean my place together and then next week we can clean yours together?' Or, 'can you come to my place once a week and wash my dishes while I breastfeed my baby or I have a rest? Then when my child is older, I can do something for you if you need.'

This exercise had two aims. The first was to challenge the well-entrenched historical view of motherhood as a natural destiny for women, hence 'easy'. The second was to acknowledge that mothers may find it hard to ask for help when they are struggling with a new infant or children, exactly due to the idea that caring is 'natural' for women. In this exercise, a network of supportive relationships was created when each person asked for help from another mother/carer and the thread was passed around. This support network was expressed by a web of colourful thread. And it was hoped that this colourful web would have a positive impact on the mothers'/carers' daily lives. This is the visual result of the Berlin workshop:

¹³ Alex Martinis Roe <http://alexmartinisroe.com/>.

¹⁴ This proposition is now part of Alex Martinis Roe, *To Become Two. Propositions for Feminist Collective Practice*. (Berlin: Archive Books, 2018) and film Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, 2016.

¹⁵ <http://rosegibbs.com/>.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of the proposition “A Ritual for the Support of Mothers,” developed with Sara Paiola, 2016.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of the proposition ‘A Ritual for the Support of Mothers’, developed with Sara Paiola, 2016.

These live art interventions, what Martinis Roe calls ‘propositions’, represent the potential for seeing other mothers and carers as allies. They challenge what it means for new mothers to care for a vulnerable infant in a capitalist and increasingly individualised society. They are both visual, symbolic and concrete representations of relationality, which I’d like to call the ‘art’ of 1970s and 1980s feminist women. It was/is the art of building webs of relationships, exchanges, dialogues and practical support for each other, from which I have learned a lot. Among the various things I have learned, concretely and for what we are discussing here, was that when my son was a baby in 2010 I instinctively wanted to reach out, seek help and create a supportive web of friendships with many new mothers and carers. It was this desire for friendship, support and solidarity that spurred me ‘outside’.

Slowly, I have come to realise that this thread signifies more than relationality between women/mothers. It also signifies, as I said at the start, a thread that I have had with my feminist mother and the maternal all of my life. When I was nine years old, my parents separated, and my mother decided to move to another Italian city quite far from the town where I lived. From that age onwards, I lived with my father (something unheard of in Italy at the time) and family friends. It is noteworthy that my parents and I never lived in a nuclear family setting, we always lived with friends. Even when my mother had that reflection on motherhood which I quoted at the start, when I was just few months old we lived in a commune. But she was the only mother living there at that time and everyone else was at work. It was the late 1970s, and my father was supportive of my mother's need to move away and realise her own self-identity and desires. Despite our separation, my mother always kept in constant contact with me—through regular visits every other weekend, phone calls, letters and holidays spent together. Ever since my mother moved away, I have been 'preoccupied with the maternal'—reversing in a way the Winnicottian term 'primary maternal preoccupation',¹⁶ which enables mothers to care for their children. Indeed, I have become preoccupied with my mother not being physically there. We never stop being daughters while our mothers are alive. We never completely stop being daughters once our mothers pass away. And a mother who loses her child never completely stops being their mother because her child is not alive.¹⁷ My mother's reflection upon motherhood a long time ago spurred her to enquire, to ask questions about herself and her place in the world as a woman and a mother. Her courage to detach herself from the idea of the 'naturally' good mother, to dare, to challenge conventions had allowed us to have a very profound, complex, at times tense, and beautiful relationship for which I am grateful. She has allowed me to know her as my mother and as the woman she was.

¹⁶ D.W. Winnicott, 'Primary Maternal Preoccupation', in *Collected Papers through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1958), pp. 300–305.

¹⁷ 'He is not dead to me' in Denise Riley, *Time Lived, without Its Flow* (London: Capsule Editions, 2012), p. 36.

The thread now brings me back to the start, not because I see a beginning and an end in this maternal thread, this maternal story, but because I see a web-like shape made of life stories, subjectivities, inter-subjectivities and relationships. This is a web made of a thread where vulnerability, dependency and the need for support are acknowledged. A web where the fantasy of individualism is uncovered and where to care in isolation is seen as unfit for mothers, for fathers, for carers, for humans. This is a web where caring is seen as a collective practice, not as an isolated private matter. Finally, as a web has no beginning or an end, it seems almost inappropriate to append a conclusion to this short testimony, other than the realization that one of the reasons I have written on the maternal, on motherhood, was probably in order also to elaborate on and process the relationship with my own mother. Moreover, if I have written on the maternal it was, perhaps, to keep my mother symbolically with me. I partially still remember how difficult it was for my nine-year-old-self to see her leave all those years ago.

Editor's Note

This contribution to the 10th anniversary issue of *Studies in the Maternal* were invited by the editorial team. As such they were internally reviewed by the journal's editorial team.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Paiola, S. 2020. A Thread, a Maternal Thread. *Studies in the Maternal*, 13(1): 18, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.309>

Published: 08 December 2020

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