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Drawing (Out) the Evil (M)other of the Family Court

To be a mother is to be saturated with the good and evil of the day. But unless you are very lucky or privileged, or both, there is always the chance that evil will seize the hour.

—Jacqueline Rose 183

As an artist, PhD researcher, and lone mother to three teenagers, this article introduces a theory of matricentric drawing through an autoethnographic practice of performance drawing. During COVID-19, I turned to my ex-husband to share the care of our children, which backfired with devastating long-term consequences. Rather than softening the blow of the pandemic, the request for help had a slow and destructive effect on our mental health and wellbeing, opening the door for him to remove them from my care. Made in the lead up to the final hearing of a court case in which I risked losing custody of my children, the drawing process began as a reflection upon legal descriptions of myself as an evil (m)other through a textual analysis of the court bundle. The article documents my autoethnographic reflections, as they visualized the effect of legal abuse upon my body and triggered gesture and movements, which were then performed as drawing acts in the family home.

With reference to research on single mothers, the impact of COVID-19 and the underlying culture of misogyny, mother blaming, and postseparation legal abuse in the UK family courts, I consider how an autoethnographic approach to my art practice activated drawing as a maternal battle cry, disarming the attacks in legalese and re-armouring my body in preparation for the final hearing.

Performed through drawing on the floor and filmed from above within the space of the kitchen, the camera documents the interweaving of daily motherwork with acts of performance drawing. As the drawing evolves, the gestures unfold in synchrony with the authenticity of mother love and care through recorded speech interactions

documenting family life. The article considers how matricentric feminism (O'Reilly) informs my arts practice in distinguishing motherhood from mothering as matricentric drawing enacts an othering of the self. It is useful both in arts-practice research as reflective writing on performance drawing and feminist activism, as data for researchers and policymakers in disentangling the multiple effects on the health and wellbeing of lone mothers and their children during and after the pandemic.



Figure. 1. Installation view of *Respondent Mother*—Video Projection of Performance Drawing to Video (left) and Performance Drawing (right) Exhibited at The Fine Art Gallery, Loughborough University, March 2023.

Made in my family home in May 2022, the video performance drawing *Respondent Mother* is a consolidation of the autoethnographic drawing methods that emerged during my PhD research as I explored the relationship between drawing and maternal subjectivity. Research exploring the interface between arts practice and autoethnography remains relatively underexplored, and although a recent contribution in the 2nd edition of the *Handbook of Autoethnography* examines crossovers between autoethnographic methods and the broad spectrum of arts subjects, there are few examples of artists researching the intersections between autoethnography and drawing. This article focuses on the braiding of performance drawing with an auto-

ethnographic method informed by Andrea O'Reilly's concept of matricentric feminism.

In the following article, contrary to the proposition that drawing is often used as “pre-writing tool to stir up memories” (Chang 84), I analyze how an autoethnographic practice of performance drawing that is both situated and relational, evolved in response to writing. In the method presented, writing autoethnography becomes the starting point for drawing acts which enable an othering of the self to take place in order to visualise the “social punishment ... of single mothers” (Rose 2).

The practice that has emerged through *Respondent Mother* and other works present an argument for matricentric drawing—a feminist maternal activism that fully realizes “the maternal power and fury promised in the Demeter archetype” (O'Reilly 208).

Skeleton Argument

I write this as an artist, a qualified teacher, and PhD candidate. As a white cisgender British woman, I occupy a place of privilege, but as a single mother with three children, these freedoms are diminished, as I experience poverty and discrimination—a situation which calls for the enshrinement of single parent status as a protected characteristic (Talbot 3). Single parents make up a quarter of all families with dependent children, and as mother to three children, my family represents a minority of just 13 per cent of all single parents in the UK (Single Parents in 2023).

I was raised in a matriarchal working-class family. I am the daughter and granddaughter to divorced single mothers and was the first in my family to go to university. My story evolves from ten years of being a single mother—a period double the United Kingdom (UK) national average (Skew et al. 230). Parenting three biologically produced children—now twelve, fourteen, and sixteen—I mothered alone, at a distance from family with the number of children and my financial situation inhibiting my propensity to cohabit (Skew et al. 230-44).

My financial situation, like others, has worsened further since COVID-19; in 2023, one in five single parents use food banks and credit cards to pay for household essentials (Single Parents in 2023), and half of all children in single-parent families live in relative poverty (IFS). Despite a rise in employment for single parents, family size is a significant factor affecting work capacity: 42 per cent of all families with three children live in relative poverty (CPAG). Although the maintenance payments from their father are not enough to even cover our food for a month, I still consider myself lucky to receive them, since 40 per cent of single-parent families receive no such payments at all from the nonresident parent.



Figure 2. Performance Drawing Act 1: Erratic—Video Still from *Respondent Mother Performance Drawing to Video 2022*

Living the “triple bind” (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado) of being a single parent has become shaped by unrelenting maternal labour, insecure housing, lack of childcare, and the frustrating cycle of low-paid, part-time, and temporary work. These facts reveal the already bleak backdrop to the crisis that unfolded during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the post pandemic context, household spending for those on low incomes increased, whereas wages and benefits stagnated well below the rate of inflation (Brewer and Patrick)—the impact of which leaves half of all single parents living in poverty.

These contextual factors are important for understanding what follows in this article, as I describe the process of creating an autoethnographic drawing documenting my response to being a respondent mother in a court case over child-contact arrangements. Although the relationship has never been amicable between myself and my children’s father, the pressures of the pandemic triggered the events that led to his applying for custody.

Like most single mothers during the pandemic, I felt a marked increase in stress, guilt, and failure, as work began to invade my family (*When Paid Work*). I echo the lament of single mothers in *Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19: Dispatches from a Pandemic* in feeling completely unseen by the media and in feeling that “my motherwork, even during a pandemic when it is so crucial, remains so devalued and invisible” as I was “trying to function in the unfunctionable” (O’Reilly 19). *Respondent Mother* is a work that reveals the unsustainable burden placed upon mothers as the “impossible subject” (Baraitser 4).



Figure 3. Video Still from *Respondent Mother Performance Drawing to Video 2022*

In terms of the legal definition of the term “respondent mother,” the application made against me was from the father of my children, and in this way, I was responding to his application as a mother. But in isolation, without this context, the term “respondent mother” has a dual meaning, as it emphasizes the mother’s role of continuously responding to the needs of her child: “Before the ‘I’ there is simply the response to the call and the demand of the Other” (Baraitser 39).

Case Summary

A month into the pandemic and after an initial panic about catching COVID-19 as the children moved between houses, I turned to my ex-husband to request a temporary arrangement for shared care of our children. Shared care in this context would, for many parents, be a positive solution, but the request for help had a slow and destructive effect on our mental health and wellbeing, and after a short time, the children began to resist the new arrangement.

After I wrote to their father about the children’s unhappiness with the new shared care arrangement, their father ended contact for the children with himself and their paternal grandmother. Legal proceedings were then initiated with the intent to remove the children from my care. The decision to cut ties with the children was likely initiated through his legal representative; he would have been advised that his legal case would be stronger if he could evidence that I had stopped him from seeing them entirely and this was the falsehood that was later spun out in his version of events presented to the family courts.

Changes to UK rules on legal aid in 2013 meant that without a concrete and recent claim of domestic abuse, like most lone mothers, I had no choice but to act as a litigant in person. Finding myself alone once more and now with full responsibility for my children, from the spring of 2021 until the summer of 2022, I learned how to be my own solicitor while also studying, working, and homeschooling my children. After six months, I eventually took a leave of absence from my studies as the multitude of responsibilities overwhelmed me.

To protect the privacy of those I write about, their identities remain anonymous, and specific details of the case are left out. Instead, in this article, I focus on the way in which the drawing realized the feminist activism of my method and the interface between autoethnography, drawing, and matricentric feminism. I have tried to only include specific facts from the case as they tell my story and shed light on my matricentric drawing method.



Figure 4. Performance Drawing Act 9: Unpredictable—Video Still from *Respondent Mother Performance Drawing to Video 2022*

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and financial pressures, we had stopped doing almost all the things we used to enjoy as a family, such as going swimming and going to the cinema; instead, we all slowly regressed into a virtual and insular world. By January 2022, my life had been completely taken over with the daily care of my children, as I reached out to external agencies for support. As I called doctors, the school, the local council, charities, families, and friends, I became caught in a never-ending cycle of care as children would get sick from COVID-19 or anxiety-related illnesses, which left them unable to engage with the world in the way they used to.

In retrospect, it was clear that this experience as it became expressed in discussions with the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) was simply fuelling the image of the anxious and unstable mother that the father's solicitor wished to present to the court. During the proceedings, the father's solicitor described me as "evil" on no less than eighteen separate occasions, and this kind of persecution is not uncommon, as there is an "increased willingness" for courts to remove children from the care of their primary carers in cases where they are accused of parental alienation (Barnett 27).

The verdict of the final hearing, however, surprised everyone. In her statement, the judge took an opposing view to the professional opinions of all those who had been consulted during the case. She drew attention to the events that had proceeded the application—recognising the many years of commitment I had made in caring for my children and repeatedly emphasizing that I was carrying out the care of the children alone and without family close by. Through a factual examination of the events, the judge wholly discredited both the privately instructed therapists and the CAFCASS report, which had identified me as harming my children by alienating them from their father and exposing them to adult issues. She would instead use the father's attempt to isolate, exclude, and exile me as the basis of her rejection of his application. The judge stated that she had never once heard me referred to as a member of his family, thus culturally resetting this expectation as the basis of a normal separated arrangement.

Her concluding remarks reflected a shift towards a more "inquisitorial approach" (Women's Aid 3) by the family courts after the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) just a month before the final hearing. However, as was so clearly the case of my own experience leading up to the final hearing, the June 2022 Women's Aid report makes it clear that "coercive and controlling behaviour remains widely misunderstood, with professionals and agencies minimising the impact of this form of abuse on victims and survivors and their children" (3).



Figure 5. Performance Drawing Act 9: Unpredictable—Video Still from *Respondent Mother Performance Drawing to Video 2022*

Autoethnography, Ethics, and Confidentiality in the Family Court

My practice as an artist was used as evidence against me in the court to shore up the narrative that I was a bad mother: negligent, uncaring, and exploitative. The ethics in making art about the lived experience of mothering, reflecting its more ambivalent aspects, was held up to scrutiny in position statements, questions were asked about my capacity as a mother to care for our children; my vulnerability became magnified and distorted into allegations of parental alienation, mental health issues, and emotional abuse.

As a feminist autoethnographer, I had equipped myself to identify and analyse the ways in which the submissions by the father (filtered through his solicitor) set out to denigrate me. I could clearly see the patriarchal language used to define good and bad mothering and the myths of motherhood that were being fashioned as weapons to use against me in legalese. In my final submission to the court, I quoted directly from the Ministry of Justice’s *Harm Panel Report*, published only a year earlier, as it raises concerns about the lack of understanding around parental alienation and the “pro-contact culture” of the courts (147).

A critical examination of the literature on cases of post separation abuse (where mothers were accused of parental alienation) enabled me to distance myself from the attacks made, as they narrated a patriarchally constructed identity of motherhood. The *Harm Panel Report* and the Women’s Aid

response to it highlighted my own experience as mirroring the patterns of abuse experienced by other mothers, as they too became victimized by the family courts.

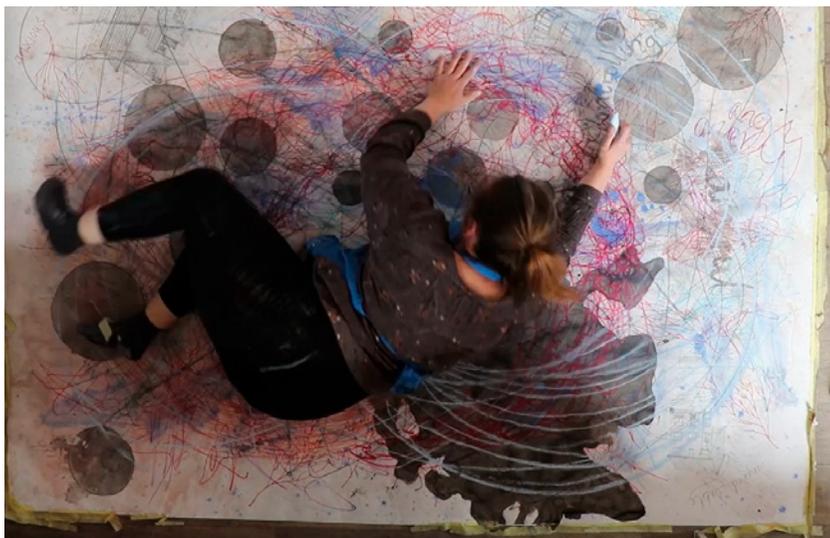


Figure 6. Performance Drawing Act 12: *Lazy*—Video Still from *Respondent Mother Performance Drawing to Video 2022*

My autoethnographic process took a “specific-to-general approach” (Chang 62), as it attended to the specific language of the court paperwork. I analysed the court bundle as a “textual artifact” (Chang 107) of my research. Through a series of drawing processes, the words selected from these documents became debunked, and in isolation provided a critique of the generalized negative stereotyping of single mothers in British culture.

My autoethnographic approach is an action of “writing to right,” “breaking silence,” and “(re)claiming voice” (Bolen qtd. in James et al. 36-37). The story I tell of being a litigant in person “position(s) the ‘I’ within a political context—one in which my situated self is constructed through cultural and political events” (Ettore 2).



Figure 7. Performance Drawing Act 8: Controlling—Video Still from *Responder Mother Performance Drawing to Video 2022*

Stacey Holeman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis propose that “auto-ethnographic works present an intentionally vulnerable subject, to purposefully open yourself up to ‘the possibility of being wounded or attacked’ (Behar, 1998) in order to call attention to the vulnerabilities that other human beings may endure in silence and shame” (24). These vulnerabilities emerge through drawing, as the words are written and drawn performatively through embodied gestures and within the context of carrying out daily reproductive work. Drawing becomes a part of this disarmouring and rearmouring of the maternal body as I draw “when my world falls apart” (Ellis 33). Through interpretative autoethnography, the court paperwork as a textual artifact invokes an “epiphanic moment” (Denzin 28-30) and allows for matricentric drawing to enact a “critical reflection upon the systems of power held in place through language” (Spry 20).

Throughout the case, I was careful to shield our children from the details of the court paperwork, as I often worked late into the night on my submissions. The children witnessed the drawing being made, and they helped me to install the work (shown in Figure.1). They spoke freely with visitors about their experiences of seeing the work evolve in our home. Since my practice takes place in the family home, informed consent occurs naturally in our daily conversations. Although I avoid talking about the specifics of the ways in which I suffered from legal abuse during the case, they have an awareness of

how I feel. There is a silence that hangs in the air as we acknowledge the differences in our relationship with their father—an acceptance that is necessary to the continuity of this relationship.

My eldest child read this article before it was published, and I talked through the relevant ethical issues with the other children. The video work was produced in high speed, which assists in disguising our identities but also makes transparent the temporal and endurance aspect of “reproductive work” (Federici), as the video distills a week’s worth of work into seventeen minutes. Since I was silenced from sharing my own experience of the family court by the legal process, the ariel view of the video provides a degree of anonymity for myself and my family, as the tops of their heads, legs and feet appear fleetingly in the video.

I presented on this work using a pseudonym and undertook an ethics application for my PhD project simultaneously with a literature review of ethical processes in autoethnographic research (Denzin; Benhabib; Denzin and Lincoln; Ettore). But it was a feminist colleague and mentor who highlighted the importance of my own voice and presence both as a woman and as a feminist, since my autoethnographic drawing practice has the potential to be transformed into “narrative representations of political responsibility” (Ettore 3).

Drawing as a Maternal Battle Cry

Respondent Mother is an example of feminist resistance; it is a form of consciousness raising as well as a strategy I used to check my embodied response to all the attacks mounted against me through a legal case, which was in fact a “vehicle for post separation abuse” (Women’s Aid 56).

Produced in May 2022, just a month before the final hearing in a trial that spanned fourteen months, *Respondent Mother* began with confessional-emotive autoethnographic writing (Chang 145) as the first step tracing the impact of the court case upon my body—as a “body of evidence” (Spry 19). This self-analysis of the changes felt in my body in response to the case triggered my search for the language used against me, as autoethnographic writing enabled me to develop the gestural and other embodied drawing acts, which were carried out in the final drawing.

My eyes are constantly heavy. The light hurts my eyes.

My breathing is laboured. It is like my airways are closing up. Each time I breathe, it feels like I am pumping bellows. At the end of each breath, I push hard through my chest. I can feel the pressure in my throat and in my heart itself. Every so often, I take a deep breath, as if I am swimming underwater.

My jaw is locked. It feels like my teeth are gritting, yet it is all at the back of my jaw.

My tongue pushes against the back of my teeth.

My whole body aches. I try to lie very still and focus on where it hurts, and the pain seems worse at my joints: I feel it in my neck, shoulders, hips, elbows, knees, wrists, and ankles. It's like the pain is making me into a wooden marionette.

I feel my heart beating deeply in my chest. My breath is forced through a narrow tube that lengthens and shallows my breath. As it reaches the end, it pushes that little bit harder, and I feel my heart pinch as it pushes itself out.

I sleep now with my head bent towards my chest in bed and my arm curled above my head in the brace position.

I have stopped speaking to my friends. I have removed myself from social media. I have stopped studying and working. Apart from the phone calls to my mother, I am floating in a vacuum without a future. I am just shackled into a constant reinvention of the past.

My children pull me into the present. They are calling me. They are older. They ask me to talk to them. To play games. To make them food.

I hold them much closer, kiss them more, stroke their hair, and gaze into their faces. I tell them I love them each day.

Drawing (Out) the Evil (M)other of the Family Court

In her book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Practice*, O'Reilly explores the ways in which feminist practices of mothering can “resist and refuse patriarchal motherhood” (168) so that mothering becomes an empowering experience for mothers. After I had written the above introductory text, I began to reread the court paperwork to locate the language that caused me to feel this way. I created a list of words in the table below that were later used to generate drawing acts. The list was collated from position statements and responses to allegations from the applicant father as they established the archetype of the unfit mother.

The writing process allowed me to unfreeze myself and engage with the allegations and accusations mimetically; I began re-enacting the words satirically as physical movements and gestures to make “visible what is often invisible in institutional motherhood” (O'Reilly 170).



1. Erratic – drawing with graphite in an erratic way.



2. Unstable – using the weight of my body to push charcoal across the paper as I fall.



3. Weak – painting faint lines with a brush while lying down, body still, and without moving my arm too much.



4. Vulnerable – scribbling anxiously around my body while moving around slowly in a circle (creating a cocoon).



5. Chaotic – muddy footprints made by my dog and marks left from cleaning her feet after a walk.



6. Distressed – drawing simultaneously with left and right hands in an arc (as if waving flares calling to be rescued).



7. Harmful – throwing warm dye from an avocado over the drawing in a saucepan.



8. Controlling – carefully drawing concentric spirals drawn from inside out, on top of circles painted in black ink.



9. Unpredictable – each of the four houses we lived in as a lone-parent family drawn in pencil with a note about why we moved linked by a wavy line with arrows showing directional movement.

Figure 9. Table A Performance Drawing Acts in *Respondent Mother*

Through their re-enactment in drawing, the words themselves become dissected and debunked, as the viewer questions their meaning against the domestic backdrop upon which they are made; it is through gesture that the textual body performs matricentrically, as mothers highlight how “regulatory elements of the institution are harmful to women and children” and how mothers can “speak to the low self-esteem, self-blame and self-hatred of internalized oppression” (O’Reilly 170).

As the drawing performance absorbs all the acts of care that unfold in this space, with my children and pets also becoming enmeshed into the drawing process, my bodily gestures express the struggle and suffering endured while lampooning the evil (m)other of the family court. It is this “self-reflexive creating of subjectivity” (170) in blending the autoethnographic method with a practice of performance drawing that allows the transformative element of O’Reilly’s matricentric feminism to be realized. The dual modality of enacting negative self-narrative with self-reflexive creativity is also emphasized by the audio edits in the video, as they capture dialogue in family life that communicates the consistent repetition of reproductive care and the tone of stoical calm, empathy, and humour in my voice as I carry out everyday essential motherwork.

The words used to describe the respondent mother are spoken, as they overlay the background sound of the video emphasizing the sequence of drawing acts as distinct and separate. These inflicted words are written into the drawing itself as a “graphic continuum” (Petheridge); the drawing develops through a diverse layering of drawing processes, which obscures and interweaves image and text. Each word is drawn with the same media that is used to carry out each individual drawing act and connects the origin in language of each word to gesture, movement, and line in drawing.



Figure 10. Detail of *Respondent Mother* Mixed Media Performance Drawing



10. Angry – short aggressive, repetitive scratching marks made with a marker pen.



11. Anxious – repeatedly drawing branching veinlike linear drawings made in red felt tip.



12. Lazy – rolling around listlessly and with minimal effort with a stick of chalk.



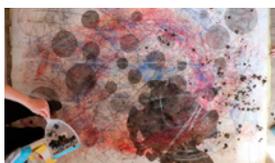
13. In turmoil – spilling all the recycling out of the bin over the drawing and then drawing around each item with a pencil.



14. Abusive – using a dishcloth and paint to whip the drawing as if flogging it.



15. Unsupportive – drawing a form unable to support its own weight; it's off balance and with spindly legs.



16. Irrational – throwing a box of blueberries over the drawing.



17. Aggressive – stamping all over the blueberries to leave stains on the paper.



18. Destructive – throwing a milk bottle filled with pink ink and smashing it in the middle of the drawing.

Figure 11. Table B Performance Drawing Acts in *Respondent Mother*

Practising Performance Drawing to Video within the Home



Figure 12. Documentary Photographs of the Makeshift Studio Set Up in Our Kitchen for *Respondent Mother* in April 2022

Spatially, my kitchen floor defined the work, as it was the only space large enough in my small three-bedroom home where I could work consistently on a performance drawing of human scale, with my whole body, working with and through interruptions. Our home became “a dynamic place for creativity” (Green 113), as I drew in the space where I care the most: cooking, cleaning, washing, and talking with my children, “documenting of everyday acts of feminist mothering” (O’Reilly 170). For a short while, my identity as an artist became synonymous with my mothering self; the personal merged with the political and pedagogical. And while this was not practically tenable for more than a week in our home, bringing art and mothering into the same space “acknowledges the confining aspects of motherhood” (170), framing its limitations within the edges of the drawing.

“Embodying a lived resistance to normative and stereotypical expectations of motherhood” (170), I drew as a woman in full control of the space I inhabit, not only as both artist and mother but also as an act of self-surveillance; through the use of a bird’s eye view, I reveal myself as vulnerable and victimized, yet I position myself as actor and director. Straddling both positions as the oppressed and emancipated is characteristic of how O’Reilly’s theories inform my own concept of matricentric drawing.



Figure 13. Video Still of *Respondent Mother Performance Drawing to Video*

Thinking Matricentrically through Materials

The choice to work across a school week allowed me the quiet time I needed to carry out a lot of the more messy and demanding drawing acts; the wet media could dry during the day when the children were at school. Drawing acts became defined and limited by maternal time structures, as they were imposed externally by school hours, dinner times, washing, and other caring responsibilities as well as those that were unexpected, such as responding to a child's distress or being called to collect a sick child from school.

As the drawing evolved, the paper picked up all the traffic of movement across its surface as it remained taped to the floor. Dirt from feet, both human and animal, footprints from shoes, food spilled and dropped, as well as water and chemicals used in cleaning are all in evidence on the paper.

Diverse materials used in the drawing process included charcoal, graphite, oil pastel, chalk, chalk pastel, ink, pencil, acrylic paint, watercolour ink and domestic materials or food, such as blueberries, dirty water from washing my dogs' paws, and ink made using boiled avocado water. A pile of washing was used to create a shape to draw around as were bowls, plates, and packaging from the recycling bin.



Figure 14. Video Still of Drawing Act 16: Irrational—*Respondent Mother Performance Drawing to Video*



Figure 15. Video Still of Drawing Act 13: In Turmoil—*Respondent Mother Performance Drawing to Video 2022*

Whereas some choices in relation to materials were preconceived before the drawing began, other decisions about materials were made in response to the domestic environment and maternal time structures. I drew upon my experience as an artist, employing my tacit knowledge (Polanyi) of drawing materials and processes in estimating how long each process would take. I would sometimes have to take a break over dinner or leave a drawing half-finished because I had to respond to the call of my children. Ideas were abandoned because they would take too long to dry or because they would simply make too much mess. I would often explain all of this to the children as I went along, educating them about the drying times and the translucency of ink and paint as they built up in layers.

The drawing was schematized; each action was loosely planned in advance as a list with details of the action to be carried out alongside the selected word. I had previously allowed for the drawing to be enacted over a period of a week while considering the characteristics of materials as they were used in sequence. Dry materials were laid down before wet ones were introduced. Wet materials were used later in the day to allow drying time overnight. Although each sequence was scripted conceptually, the materials I used and the gestures I enacted to perform each series of marks were not rehearsed beforehand, and the entire drawing was done as a one-off timed experiment.

Staging Drawing from a Bird's Eye View

The use of a digital video and still camera to document the practice from a bird's eye view frames the maternal body from above within the context of daily life within the kitchen setting. The camera is set up in a makeshift way using pieces of wood, clamps, and bags of flour. As the paper fills the kitchen floor, the view from the camera picks up the movement of domestic tasks—such as the cupboard doors being opened and closed by myself and my children.

The camera recorded the changes in light over the drawing throughout the day and night, as I drew when times allowed. I was careful to only record while I was drawing. The cooking, cleaning, and childcare all happened in the spaces in between. The drawing remained stuck to the floor with us all walking across it.

The camera also recorded the audio and visual elements, collecting conversations and surrounding noises in the family home, which were later used in the video audio along with the documentation of performance drawing to video.

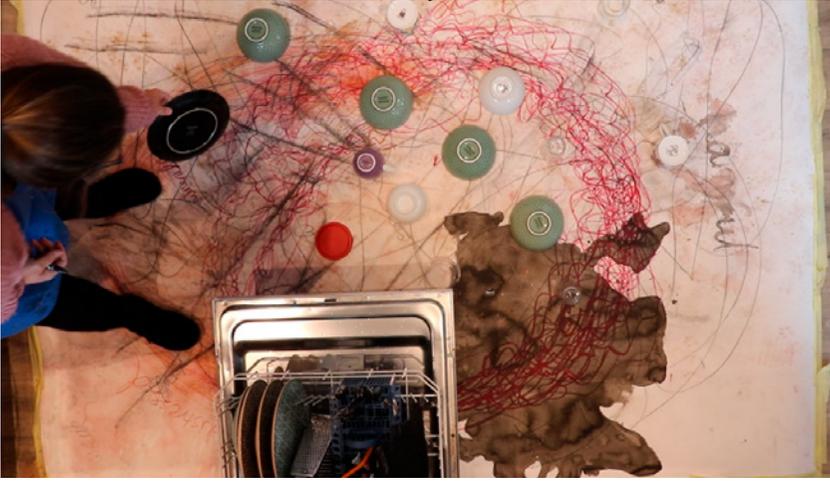


Figure 16. Video Still from Drawing Act 8: Controlling—*Respondent Mother Performance Drawing to Video 2022*

The Many Layers of Matricentric Drawing

In the same way that Spry proposes performing autoethnography to advocate a “performative-I disposition” (41-74), matricentric drawing is “an act of consciousness” (Newman qtd. in Zegher 267); the staging of the gesture and line affirmed that “I am conscious, I exist” (Newman qtd. in Zegher 237). Drawing becomes the activity that reveals both the intimacy and complexity of maternal thinking (Ruddick) as I reflect upon my own thought processes as a mother. Each word inflicted from the opposing side was instead transformed into a series of drawing acts performed across a single surface, as they evidenced the “many layers of thinking” (Newman qtd. in Zegher, 67) that allow for the complexity of maternal subjectivity to be communicated.

Evidencing a diverse range of drawing methods in layers and sequentially allows for the myriad of “multiple maternal identities” (Juhasz 400) to be visualized, as they reflect a diversity of thinking processes in reproductive work. Similarly, as the drawing measures 2.2m x 1.9m, the shifts in scale demand the viewer to move back and forth from the anthropomorphic to the intimate. This movement by the viewer draws attention to maternal practice, as it requires both a micro and macro focus since “being around [small] children for prolonged periods of time requires working at different economies of scale and different spatio-temporal frameworks” (Baraitser).

This layering of micro and macro drawing acts is visible in the combining of gestural embodied drawing processes with methods that are more pictorial or

illustrative in their approach. At a distance, it becomes possible to view the marks made by the whole body, as I enacted gestures corresponding to such words as “erratic” (Figures 2 and 10), “angry” (Figures 12 and 10), “distressed” (Figures 10 and 6), and “abusive” (Figure 14)—marks that fill the space in their energy and movement. The drawing sequences relating to “unpredictable” (Figures 4 and 6) were executed slowly and carefully in pencil using photographs on an iPad as a reference. The word “unpredictable” was used to exaggerate the harm caused towards the children through multiple home and school moves. Normative ideals of stability (of remaining in the same family home) were weaponized against me as my precarious financial situation led me to relocate in order to secure better a job, housing, and education.



Figure 17. Video Still from Drawing Act 9: Unpredictable—*Respondent Mother Performance Drawing to Video 2022*

The small sections of text handwritten in pencil extending from the illustratively drawn houses are layered in between other drawing acts. These intricate pencil drawings and text require the viewer to move closer to the surface of the paper to observe and read the details. The shifting between these practices of drawing were necessary both to articulate how the situational, contextual, and practical elements of mothering require the use of illustrative and text-based methods. The consistent mention of my own mother in these texts and her description as “my mum” rather than “my parents” indicates an exclusively matrilineal relationship, pointing to the importance of the genealogies of women in maternal identities.



Figure. 18. Unpredictable—Pencil Drawings Made from Photographs of Our Rented Family Homes Since Becoming a Solo Mother in 2013

Matricentric Drawing as a Performative Practice

Matricentric drawing builds upon concepts of performance drawing, as explained in the text of the same name by Maryclare Foá et al. The intention of the book was to explore what drawing can tell us about the movement from mind to hand to space. But as the movement from hand to space operates concurrently within the narrative of a specifically maternal trauma, what can the drawing say in relation to the situated knowledge (Haraway 581-95) of the artist? How can the lines drawn in movement trace first the image of maternal suffering, of a body in pain, and then open up a space for activism and transformation?

In the *Stage of Drawing, Gesture and Act*, Avis Newman proposes to juxtapose the performative gesture in theatre with that in drawing (Newman qtd. in Zegher 74). Throughout my research, I had been thinking about the daily life of our family as a kind of theatre—it performs within its own domestic stage with unexpected and predictable actions and “intra-actions” (Barad) while they erupt between the essential acts of living. Gestures are repeated and observed, as my own maternal acts of care become enmeshed with the memory of maternal touch and speech that preoccupies maternal thinking (Ruddick).

These gestures are wholly present in the drawing, but through auto-ethnography, they become entangled with a mimetic and subversive mockery of the respondent mother. The stage of drawing in this instance becomes conflated with the imaginary courtroom as I prepare for battle to defend my-self through a re-enactment of daily bodily gestures that are composed in response to words mounted against me. In *Respondent Mother 2022*, the process of “drawing is akin to an interior monologue emerging to the surface in our actions” (Newman qtd. in Zegher 78)—a monologue constructed from the words that stung my flesh in the legal process yet became unravelled by enactment within and through the daily acts of maternal care within the kitchen.

Matricentric Lines and Movement-Based Thinking

The drawing *Respondent Mother* is composed of sequential linear drawings in which the surface remains partially visible. As an open structure, and despite its illustrative elements, the linear performative marks construct a kind of net where the drawing “resists pictorial illusion” (Rosand 110). David Rosand asserts that drawing is “a way of perceiving the self” (Rosand 16) and prompts me to consider that in “rehearsing the creative gestures” in my imagination, the viewer is similarly invited to “participate in that reflection of its creation” (Rosand 2). I wish to suggest here that the linearity of matricentric drawing is characterized by the “movement-based thinking” (Phelan qtd. in Rosenthal) where “drawing is used to perform thinking in a ‘line’” (Luzar 53).

The linearity of marks as they connect to the text-based prompts and their relation to one another in sequence are what allow for meaning to emerge beyond performative drawing as “the gesture in itself” (Zegher 20). Drawing is more than the sign of a performance having happened (Foá et al. 16); it is the composition of linear gestures that moves the drawing beyond the act of recording time, although duration is intrinsic to its production.

It is the relational potential of a line that unravels the psychophysical dialogue with the self: “Line draws on relation as much as relation draws on line” (Butler and Zegher 23). In her essay on linear drawing, Catherine de Zegher observes the kinesthetic qualities of drawing as it is—“born from an outward gesture linking inner impulses and thoughts to the other through the touching of a surface with repeated graphic marks and lines” (Butler and Zegher 23).

In performing drawing acts matricentrically, the space opened up within the surface of the page reveals the self as an other—as a body positioned in relation to a socio-cultural construct of a (m)other—and this happens through a linear and gestural drawing away from the body, drawing outwards and towards the other: “to gesture outwards is not only the ‘I exist, but I exist in relation to someone else’” (Newman qtd. in Zegher, 203).

It is arguably this distancing of the self from the self that is necessary for mothers to recognize the hidden and silent acts of aggression as they are made “the objects of licensed cruelty” (Rose 2). As a self-reflexive process, the drawing acts in *Respondent Mother* were a process of resurrection—a purging of the patriarchal (m)other in oneself.

Matricentric drawing proposes a visual strategy for transcending the West’s poor treatment of mothers, in which they are systematically denigrated and silenced in patriarchal motherhood. As an activist process of consciousness raising, it holds the potential to empower women in the visualization of internalized oppression and the recognition of matrilineal power in their mothering practice and reproductive work.

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