



***BECOMING 'MOTHER':  
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY THROUGH PAINT AND PROSE***

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**Abstract**

The forces at work influencing how I identify with motherhood is the focus of my paintings throughout my child's first year of life. In this autoethnographic visual essay, I analyze my visual depictions of the struggles with which I wrestled. I consider ways in which my personal struggles conform or reject popular notions of motherhood and breastfeeding. I critically look at historical and current visual culture influences that may be at work in my own contradicting images of motherhood, negotiating feminist ideologies with my own experiences as a mother who breastfeeds. Through the lens of social constructionism and feminist new materialism, my images not only reflect what is being experienced, but they also influence how I make meaning of these experiences and my identity in motherhood.

*Keywords:* auto-ethnography, motherhood, breastfeeding, identity politics, arts based research

**Breastfeeding: Bond(age)s**

As a new mother, I wrestled with my new identity and the social isolation and lack of bodily independence that breastfeeding created. As an artist, it seemed a natural impulse to create as a means of understanding these new experiences. As a researcher, it was imperative to analyze my painted depictions of motherhood, to better understand not only my shifting identity, but to compare it to a broader understanding of motherhood experiences in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

In this autoethnographic visual narrative,<sup>2</sup> I analyze my transition into motherhood through my breastfeeding relationship—the most intimate and ongoing struggle that embodied my shift from singular to plural. Breastfeeding was the first act of love and the first struggle I took on as a mother. I physically

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<sup>1</sup> To begin my research, I heavily documented my experiences both written and visually. I took many pictures while nursing, as many mothers with a smartphone might do. Alongside the photographic documentation, I kept a non-traditional journal. Logistically, I couldn't carry a sketchbook or journal around with me as I awkwardly juggled my baby, especially while nursing. Rather, as thoughts emerged, I wrote on available scrap paper, and kept them in a folder for later analysis. Poems, thoughts, documentations of sounds and smells were scribbled down on receipts, paper bags, notebooks, etc. As I worked on a painting, I would review the notes to focus on a specific aspect of my experiences, such as the frustrations of spilt milk or the monotony of pumping. When nearing completion of a painting, I organized my writings into prose for that specific piece. I continued this ritual through my first year of motherhood.

<sup>2</sup> Autoethnography, a form of qualitative research, has been described by Andrew Sparkes (2000) as “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experiences of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (p. 21). Whereas ethnography is concerned with studying individual peoples and cultures, autoethnography positions the author as subject. Although often criticized as simply autobiographical, without social context or a place in proper research methods, autoethnography is arguably a more direct, unfiltered means of research. The personal and the cultural are tightly woven, and a singular person is working within a societal framework of co-constructed meanings (Wall, 2006). Being the main subject of study in my research of maternal identities and breastfeeding allows me to be the insider, rather than an outsider controlling the research narrative of the “other.” I am given the unique opportunity to directly access the subject (myself) without any barriers of power or privilege. In my search for broader understanding, I acknowledge my subjectivity and how personal experiences influence the research process (Ellis & Bochner, 2010).

bled as I tried to continue giving life to this new being. The act represented a tether, a strain, and a bond that permeated all aspects of my life—rewriting previous habits, roles, and relationships. My images attempt to portray the mother as more than just a “provider of milk.” I do not explicitly show lips encasing a nipple, because I want the viewer to see my journey as more than my breasts.

Breastfeeding was much more than the breasts. It was a physical tether that kept my child close, curbing my autonomy. I chose to paint moments with and without my child, as breastfeeding and motherhood permeated all aspects of my life, even when my child was not in view. From the clothes that I wore (modest but easy access to breasts for nursing<sup>3</sup>) to how long I could be out (every three hours I needed to breastfeed or pump), I had to rethink my definition of independence as well as servitude. During those first months postpartum, I never knew when he would need to nurse and had to keep him close. The bond was bondage. In Figure 1, I paint the physical closeness, the bondage, that was required in how my son was always tethered to me, even when not physically attached to my breast. I emphasize my resistance to healthcare expectations of being a good breastfeeding mother by holding a cup of coffee (which is often on the long list of “should nots” for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers). And yet, even while I am defiantly drinking a cup of coffee, my child was the center of attention—people would greet him, asleep on my chest, before making any eye contact with me. Often, I chose to wear him in a carrier, rather than place him in a stroller, just so that passersby would have to ask me first before touching and fawning over him. Here, I give a sliver of that seemingly irresistible sentimentality by cropping his lips into the painting. The viewer recognizes the cliché plump cheeks of an infant, but their

<sup>3</sup> I use the word nurse to refer to not only the physical act but the emotional entanglement of care and need. Although nurse can be used in a variety of contexts (such as to nurse a wound, nurse a child, or nurse a person back to health), the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) definition consistently uses descriptions of care (ex: to care for, caress, to watch over) in describing the verb nurse (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Therefore, I use nurse to refer to the broader connections of breastfeeding in its entanglement to care, emotional bonds, and physical need. I use the word breastfeeding to refer to the very medical distinction of a child receiving nutrition from the breast. This may include pumping, as a child utilizing breastmilk may receive milk pumped from the mother—an act filtered through plastic equipment and sanitation rituals. I use breastfeeding as a medicalized, impersonal frame for the act.

gaze is also pulled towards the physical and symbolic fabric<sup>4</sup> that binds him and me. Behind the fabric, behind the baby, behind the bond(age), was me.



*Figure 1. Time / Two hours since / One hour until / Tethered. 20” x 30,” 2015, painting of a baby wrapped in blue close to mother’s chest while she holds a red cup of coffee. Courtesy of Courtney Tyler.*

### Negotiating the Gaze

All too often in the history of European and U.S. visual culture, women have been used as objects to be looked at. Specifically, women have been projected

<sup>4</sup> Artist Lindsay Obermeyer (2008) also uses textiles as a symbol for connection between mother and child. She uses the knit medium to explore ways in which connections stretch, bind, and unravel. Knit sweaters with bodily, knit cords stretch and connect with other knitted forms. The knitted clothing, a domesticized craft, is highly centered around the artist’s experience of motherhood. The medium itself is practical in its ability to be easily picked up or set down when mothering demands call. It is also symbol in its tangled loops that connect and tangle with previous loops. Similarly, I employ fabric in Figure 1 as a symbolic binding, tangling, and stretching of the mother-child relationship. Wrapping a baby against the chest provides both utility and a reminder of the literal binding.

as objects according to the desires of men. When analyzing men's gaze within the context of film, Laura Mulvey details how the woman on screen is exhibited as an object for fetishism or voyeurism (Mulvey, 1989; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). I am particularly mindful how my painted images of the female body will be gazed upon. I negotiate ways in which to share the exposed body without fetishizing the breastfeeding body. I want the mother to be seen, not consumed. In Figure 2, a Google search of "breastfeeding mother," the woman is being gazed upon as she and the child are, most often, connected in their own peaceful gaze. They are surrounded by a simple, bright background that minimizes other distractions and objects as though the bond between mother and child is all that breastfeeding is about. The women are depicted almost in a state of leisure and relaxation. Additionally, Figure 2 depicts a whitewashed version of women who breastfeed in which a majority of the women are not only dressed in white, but light skinned and seemingly able-bodied. When creating my own images, I am conscious that they are indeed self-portraits and not a model for all mothering experiences. Most of my images come from the position of the mother. The gaze you are participating in is hers alone. As a result, the painted images are cropped uncomfortably close. The viewer is forced into the mother's space, participating and becoming the breastfeeding mother.

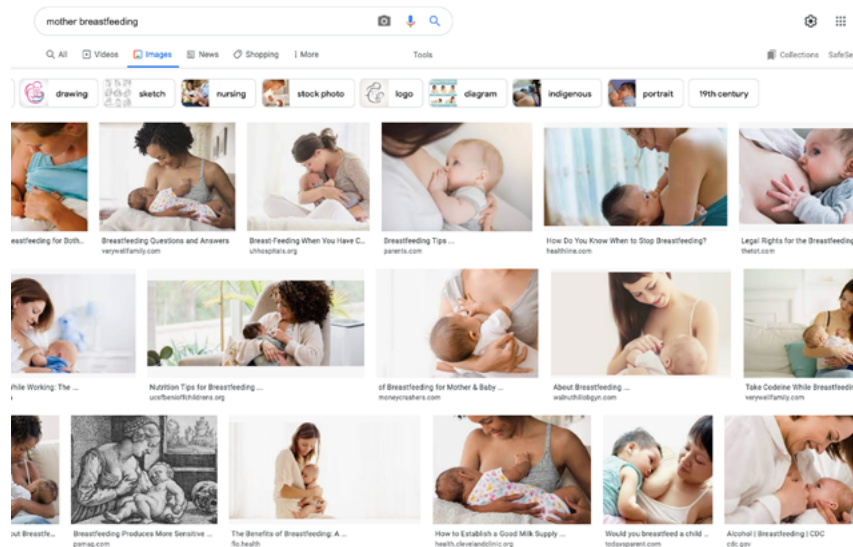


Figure 2. Screenshot of Google image search results to "mother breastfeeding," 2021.

## Motherhood Making Meaning

My motherhood is intimate and full of touch—sometimes too much touch—as in Figure 3 where my son pinches and bunches my skin as we nurse. I included prose with my images, rather than titles, because a simple label was inadequate to describe these paintings. Just as my motherhood was textured and full of contradictions, so are the titles. In Figure 3, for example, I am full of the warmth of nursing and yet the pain of pinched breasts. Often, I would write scribbles of sounds, thoughts, and emotions while nursing or pumping. These writings became a focal point that I meditated on during the painting of each image. While obsessively painting throughout my first year of motherhood, I entered into a cathartic state. I needed the paint to reveal to me what was happening in the haze of little sleep, spilt milk, and lack of identity. In the next section, I describe how meaning and maternal identity is not only reflected in but formed through the painted images.



Figure 3. *Warmth pressing / Hands pushing / Skin pulling / Stretch marks still forming.* 12" x 6," 2015, oval painting of an infant's hand pinching the breast as he nurses. Courtesy of Courtney Tyler.

### Feminist Material Culture of Breastfeeding

I use a combination of visual culture studies, critical social theory, and feminist critiques to analyze maternal ideologies. Visual culture study, as defined by art educators Karen Keifer-Boyd and Jane Maitland-Gholson (2007), concerns itself with “the pursuit of the meaning of imagery that includes fine art, folk art, mass media, design, popular culture, architecture, and other constructed categories of visual phenomena in the everyday life of diverse societies” (p. xix). Specifically, I look at pop culture and breastfeeding support literature’s maternal images alongside my own created images of motherhood. I wrestle with the popular images of motherhood I see and what I am actually experiencing. Kate Kretz (2012) declares “the visual history of motherhood, like everything else, has been told by men,” (8:28). Furthermore, mothering has been “simultaneously idealized and trivialized” (8:39). In response, artist-mothers have been resisting the patriarchal narrative of mothering and create, instead, from their own lived experiences. A most direct opposition to idealization and trivialization, Renee Cox (1993) creates a powerful self-portrait in *The Yo Mama* photograph. Her assertive posture and gaze demands viewers to confront typical depictions of motherhood and reimagine a new image for the breastfeeding mother. The strength in Cox’s naked body is made hyperreal with stark shadows and highlights revealing her musculature. She holds her child perpendicular and smiling at the camera while the viewer submits to them both, just slightly lower than the child’s gaze, looking up at the statuesque mother. A decade later, Catherine Opie (2004), in her breastfeeding self-portrait, deconstructs cis gender, heteronormative expectations of a nursing mother. Opie sits as she holds her child, and the viewer is invited into a more relaxed and intimate moment compared to Cox’s confrontational photograph. However, tattoos, scars, skin folds and elongated breasts, shown in Opie’s photograph, are not part of predominant visual culture idealized image of motherhood.

Visual representations of motherhood can be understood through a social constructionist view—meaning is made through specific cultural contexts, through spoken, written, and even visual language. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) hold that visual representations are more than a mere reflection of our world. They are the ways in which we construct meaning of the material world (Sturken & Cartwright,

2001). Maternal images are not simply reflecting what the motherhood experience is in the United States. Maternal images are also acting upon us, influencing how we make meaning of motherhood. Moreover, my images not only reflect what is being experienced, but they also influence how I make meaning of these experiences and my identity in motherhood.

Particularly relevant here is the philosophical discussion from political theorist Jane Bennett (2010) on “vibrant matter” and the relationship between human and nonhuman things. When discussing the relationship between humans and objects, Bennett prefers the word “actant” over “things” because even non-human things influence; independent writer and scholar in political ecology, Alan Van Wyk (2012) points out that this influencing is the difference between “effect and affect” (p. 132). Bennett’s ideas on “vibrant matter” guide how I analyze maternal imagery. Images are not stagnant objects, they also are *actants* and influence viewers. The meanings of images “lie not within their image elements alone, but are acquired when they are ‘consumed,’ viewed, and interpreted. The meanings of each image are multiple; they are created each time it is viewed” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 25). I hadn’t considered the cultural contexts that negotiate meaning in the naked, breastfeeding body and objectifying male gaze until I had worked through several paintings and began to share them with the public. Figure 4 is an image meant to focus on the medical necessities of birth to contrast the natural, skin-to-skin of mother and child. It is my very first experience of nursing. However, the painted breast elicited discomfort and even shock in some male viewers. I am not in full control of the meanings found in my work. If meanings are created in the cultural and personal contexts in which they are consumed (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001), Figure 4 is located in a predominantly white, conservative community in the United States. My own images, however, honestly produced, are still in the hands of the viewer to determine meaning.



Figure 4. *Drugged and Sticky / Hot / and Tangled / One becomes Two.* 12" x 6," 2015, oval painting of nondescript infant wrapped in medical cords, laying on top of mother's chest. Courtesy of Courtney Tyler.

The autoethnographic aspect of my research further assists in creating meaning and identity as a mother who breastfeeds. "As a method, autoethnography is both process and product" (Ellis & Bochner, 2010, p. 1). As process, I painted my experiences of the first year of motherhood and analyzed these visual depictions of struggles. I considered ways in which they conform to or reject popular notions of motherhood and breastfeeding specifically. I looked at historical and current cultural pressures and images and how they connote ideologies in my own, often contradicting, images of motherhood. The process of autoethnography

formed and evolved the meaning within my images. As product, I produced evocative images and writings that not only tell readers about breastfeeding and my mothering experiences, but act upon the viewer. I share personal experience in an engaging and accessible way to reach a wide audience (Ellis & Bochner, 2010). My intention is for my images to evoke a dialogue with mothers, families, women in general, and anyone who breastfeeds.

### Breast is Best and the Invisible Mother

The discourse around breastfeeding and motherhood is complex and contradictory. A phrase common among educational material for new mothers is "breast is best," which implies that breast milk is indeed the healthiest and best choice of nutrition for a baby. However, educational material and images proclaiming "breast is best" often neglect to consider the mother's needs—*my* needs—and societal pressures around nursing. Kinser (2010) discusses the impact of "pronatal" discourse pushed in the 1980s to counter perceived anti-mother feminist views derived from radical feminisms. Pronatalism is, in Kinser's words, "the excessive and sometimes obsessive focus on babies and children that often obscures the impact that raising, educating, and caring for children has on families, institutions, and individuals ... often celebrated at the expense of women's self-determination" (p. 97). Pronatalism took the focus off of whether mothers work in or outside the home and put the needs of their babies over mothers' personhood.

Feminist bioethics scholar Rebecca Kukla (2006) discusses the gap between low breastfeeding rates and widespread knowledge of the benefits of breastfeeding. Not only are mothers held responsible for their own bodies, both pregnant, nursing, and potentially pregnant, they are held responsible for their children's health. Kukla argues that maternal responsibilities in children's health are not isolated from the social and environmental factors such as race, income, and social support networks. What's more, health initiatives presume that if we could simply educate mothers and persuade them to make the "right" (re: moral) choice, our children would be healthier. However, this approach "utterly fails to examine or address the *reason* for this gap between message and behavior" (Kukla, p. 162).

Breastfeeding rates in the United States are lowest among low-income,

minoritized mothers. It is not a realistic, livable choice for many women, particularly those in the socially vulnerable groups that are statistically least likely to breastfeed. “Such facts stand at odds with the image of breastfeeding that we regularly ‘sell’ in our culture—an image of a joyous and natural bonding practice” (Kukla, 2006, p. 163). In looking at my paintings, I see the subconscious struggle in creating my own images of motherhood and breastfeeding. The soft color palettes, gentle touches, and tame handling of paint all hint at stock images of Eurocentric, White, joyous motherhood. However, I crop uncomfortably close, often positioning the viewing not as an onlooker but as the mother. I include objects that refer to the limitations that breastfeeding create, such as the blue wrap in Figure 1 or the pump in Figure 5.



Figure 5. *Whomm / drip / whomm / drip / am I human?* 16” x 20,” 2015, painting of person sitting in a nondescript space, blank book open, and subtle cords of breast pump equipment. Courtesy of Courtney Tyler.

The scrutiny mothers receive regarding when to nurse, where to nurse (i.e., not in public), and how long to nurse are diverse, confusing, and oppressive. Curriculum and advertising instructing “breast is best” without acknowledging how these external strains affect mothers’ physical, emotional, and psychological well-being focus on the “benefits of the milk itself, treating mothers as disembodied providers of milk who must be educated and scrutinized” (Wall, 2001, p. 594). Sociologist Glenda Wall (2001) writes how focusing on breastfeeding as best ignores the valid needs and wants of the mother; further, despite an emphasis on the bonding and brain development that can occur from the breastfeeding relationship, the aim is entirely the baby’s well-being, rendering the mother invisible.

“Breast is best.” “Breastfeeding aids in bonding.” “Breast milk is the healthiest option.” It never occurred to me what those phrases implied until the moment my child would not latch. If breast is best, any other choices in my mothering would be below the standard. If breastfeeding is crucial to bonding, how much less would I bond with my child if I could not nurse past the first two days? Are my needs so unimportant that I should be isolated in a back room, physically bleeding to feed my child? Does the mother even have needs? I ask these and other questions as I analyze my paintings.

Kukla (2006) writes, “contemporary American culture asks women to breastfeed, and holds them morally accountable for doing so, but also asks them to do so in a space and with a body to which many American women simply don’t have access” (p. 177). In Figure 5, I am pumping in a back room, because it is socially unacceptable to do so anywhere else, even when more of my breasts are covered than most women’s dresses, sweaters, and tops with low necklines. I ask how I would ever be able to return to work, when I needed to pump every three hours, in a private yet sanitary room (*not* a bathroom stall, as many women are forced to do). How was this practice aiding in bonding, when I was constantly isolated to nurse or pump while my body hurt and ached and I attempted to focus on anything, such as the blank book in front of me, that distracted me from the pains and frustrations of nursing.

### A Breastfeeding Feminist: Responding to Feminist History

How we as a society have treated motherhood has been textured over the past 100 years. Movements have come and gone, but the one thing that remains is our contradicting expectations of mothers. “Feminist writers and activists in the United States have moved at various points in history between celebrating motherhood, critiquing it, using it as leverage to gain other rights, and conceptualizing it so that mothering can be a more empowering experience for women” (Kinser, 2010, p. 21). Feminist movements have seldom allowed room for inclusive discourse when it comes to mothering. Often motherhood—or certain lifestyles of motherhood (e.g., homemakers, low-waged working mothers)—has been considered a hindrance to women’s liberation (Kinser, 2010).

However, feminist writers, artists, and—most importantly—mothers today are re-conceptualizing motherhood. While early feminisms may have neglected the individual woman’s experience, moves towards transnational feminisms promote a sensitivity to differences and the unique experiences individual women have (Tong & Botts, 2018). For example, women in collectivist cultures often value community and family more than individual-focused cultures. Artist Claudia Karvan, in an interview with Rachel Power, author of *Motherhood and Creativity*, stated “equality is not only about providing opportunities for women in the workplace, it’s also about lifting up the value of raising a family” (Power, 2015, Location no. 367). A feminist understanding of motherhood must be broad enough to uplift diverse experiences of mothering. It took me awhile to get to the same place as Karvan. As I painted those early images, I struggled to find my own balance between enjoying the working woman I was before and secretly enjoying domesticity. In Figure 6 I embraced my “domesticated” hands, now calloused and dirtier than when I was in the workforce. Being at home has taught me ways to be self-sustaining: gardening, house repairs, cloth diapering, cooking from scratch, etc. My hands are constantly messy in these creative endeavors.



*Figure 6. Hand of a Homemaker. 18” x 26,” 2016, painting of hand with crusted dirt against a blue background. Courtesy of Courtney Tyler.*

As my child and I gained a closer, symbiotic nursing relationship, I began to look outward. Media critic Susan Douglas (1994) described how not much had changed from the 1950s to the 1990s. Guilt, career limits, and social isolation continued, despite the many choices mothers seemed to have. Douglas (1994) points out, mothers felt even more divided in their identities than 1950’s mothers:

Like a toxic spill from the 1950s ideology that we can’t seem to clean up or bury, the notions that working mothers are, ipso facto, depriving someone, usually a loved one, of something, that they shouldn’t be too ambitious, and that they should be constantly guilty, contaminate our lives. They don’t stop women from working any more today than they did in the 1950s, because most of us haven’t much choice. But this tension between old images and new realities, the kind of media lag our mothers lived with, still corrodes women’s sense of self-worth, of what we’re entitled to, and what we can rightly ask of our men. (pp. 59-60)

I argue, 30 years later, today’s mothers still live in this tension between, “old

images and new realities.” Although pop culture has changed dramatically since the 1990s or 1950s, there is still a media lag from mainstream understandings of breastfeeding and motherhood to one’s lived experiences. It affects mothers’ psyche and how well mothers feel they are succeeding in motherhood. Kinser (2010) discusses the illusion of choice in pro-breastfeeding literature, and thus empowerment, afforded mothers. She writes, “‘choice’ often ignores the economic and cultural conditions that women are in when they make decisions for themselves and their families” (p. 162). Pro-breastfeeding campaigns seeking to persuade mothers into making the “choice” to breastfeed, Kukla (2006) argues, may succeed at the expense of mother’s emotional and socioeconomic security. Is it even a choice if women are morally pressured to breastfeed?

Even with a seemingly unfair system, mothers often feel guilt or regret in their personal mothering choices, as though they had failed on a moral level (Power, 2015). Musician Deline Briscoe, during an interview with Power (2015), explained how she felt too guilty to hire a babysitter to have a night out on her own. The only time Briscoe used childcare was when she needed to work. This is a narrative all too familiar in my own mothering choices yet can be further complicated by highlighting the intersectionality of race, sexuality, socioeconomic class, among other identities and experiences. Mothering choices weigh on the shoulders of individual mothers, rather than societal structures. For example, women do not forgo breastfeed from lack of understanding the medical benefits. Rather, the most common reason cited by women is breastfeeding’s incompatibility with work (Lee, 2018). When a mother is unable to overcome her socioeconomic class and synthesize work and breastfeeding practices, the failure to breastfeed rests on her shoulders alone. “Mom guilt” is complicated when discrimination, prejudices, and privileges are entwined. Breastfeeding’s history with wet nursing, often associated with slavery in the United States, creates tension between breastfeeding authorities and nursing mothers (Lee, 2018). Black women feeding white babies at the expense of their own children racially codes breastfeeding decisions and is compounded with gaps in health services for Black women and discriminatory practices in health care (Lee, 2018). And yet, a mother’s guilt doesn’t seem to connect with the external authorities pressing down on her individual experiences.

### Autonomy Claimed

In response to feeling trapped by cultural determinations of the breast and motherhood, I took a cathartic pause to create a painting without direction, planning, or considerations other than to feel the frustration of having to keep my breasts covered. Rolling scrap canvas across the floor, I grabbed a deep brown paint—the color of my areola, darkened by the hormones from breastfeeding—and boldly cast a curved, breasted brushstroke. I continued to strike the canvas with both flicks of anger and tender strokes. The results are in Figure 7. The painting greatly contrasts the meticulously rendered images of my other work in the series. This break in style reflects my break in motherhood traditions, in propriety, and in concern for the gaze of others.



Figure 7. *Untitled*. Digital Photograph of 3' x 5' unstretched canvas, 2016.

Courtesy of Courtney Tyler.

Figure 8 marks a shift in my understanding of maternal identity. After hours crouched over the paintbrush, I stepped back to realize how the painting had become obsessively detailed. I was consumed in following each thread of fabric and repetitiously transcribing them. My child had fallen asleep early that



night, and I did not waste any of that time resting my own body. Hours into the night, I sat over the kitchen table, painting as if it were my sole purpose in life. Just that morning, I had been reading about how our days can become so routine, so monotonous. Before motherhood, I felt free to change as quickly as the wind. I could grab lunch with a friend at a moment's notice, stay late at work, take an extra-long shower, or spontaneously make an extravagant dinner before my husband returned home. I was anything but a pattern. Suddenly, breastfeeding formed my identity into monotonous routine; the demands of nursing, feeding, and caring for my baby took precedence. My schedule worked around the moment my baby decided to wake. Does he begin the day nursing at 4:00 a.m. or 6:30 a.m.? Whatever time, I must begin mentally blocking off my day in three-hour increments—not to mention his on-the-dot nap times. Nine months into the routine, I only expected the same for tomorrow. The complex, beautiful, yet obsessively scheduled life had my soul lulled to sleep as well. I did not consider big changes to my heart, my spirit, while trying to adhere to the predictable pattern of my days. Painting the pattern on my shirt became a cathartic response. It was my desperate attempt to resist and accept what was, has, and *is* happening. The pattern I painted is painfully repetitious and detailed, but I was still the creator of it, I realized. And to be a creator, I must have some bit of autonomy left inside me.



Figure 8.

*The Clasp / Snap Pop / First on, last off / And access never denied. 24" x 12," 2016, oval painting of patterned shirt and bra strap. Courtesy of Courtney Tyler.*

Creative writer, Nicole Blackman (2012) describes how a poem that she wrote opened the door to discussions with young women about their “creative” desire to self-destruct. Blackman describes the act of creative self-destruction as a needed ritual, offering a chance for mastery when the individual is feeling most out of control (Blackman, 2012). Creation and self-destruction both offer a sense of control—as long as the individual is doing the creating and destructing. In painting, although not calling upon a creative desire to self-destruct, I was searching for a ritual and belief in myself—my own identity—at a time when I felt powerless and invisible to society. I found ritual through my artmaking.

Other artists have felt similarly. Rachel Epp Buller’s *The Food Landscape* (2008) visually narrates breastfeeding in a similar fashion. She documents the entwined relationship of infant, mother, and feeding through printmaking. Buller uses solid foods to screen print visual logs of how her child transitions from exclusive breastfeeding to fully solids—a weaning process of 8 months. It is a daily ritual that spurs the mother towards ritualistic documentation, creating over 300 prints. Creative expression during new motherhood has often been experienced as a “need.” Power (2015) compiled a book of interviews with creative moms. Power explains, “writing became my single act of independence – a mutiny against days characterized by mere sufficiency and selflessness” (2015, Location no. 132). Creating a series of paintings on motherhood was more than an artistic project—I *needed* it during that time as my “single act of independence.” I was claiming my autonomy.

I was a servant to my child in so many ways, but I often resisted this title—not out of humility, but of a desire to be my own, autonomous being. “To love at all is to be vulnerable,” according to C. S. Lewis (1960, p. 169). I had always read that as to be vulnerable to pain or to having a heart broken. But for me to love as a mother is to be vulnerable to my autonomy—to allow myself to be eaten up, physically, emotionally, spiritually, for the *betterment of another*. To love as a mother is to be vulnerable to my perceived identity. I allow my identity to morph and evolve into what my child needs. Painting my series on my motherhood was, I realized, a push and pull with autonomy.

Painting empowered me to see myself through this hazy, sleepless fog. In my search for autonomy, I find my identity in serving my child. Figure 9 is

a concluding painting in my search for identity. I feel complete, not lacking, after creating this image. It is a memory of my son in the early fall, when everything was in transition. He had just learned to walk and was truly mobile and independent in that fashion. The corn was dying, the evenings were still warm, and he was full of wonder as he was able to walk and explore new places. The title, "...and I saw that it was good," references the book of Genesis when the Creator stepped back and viewed his creation. And now that the cycle of breastfeeding had ended, I see who I was and who I became through the process of physically growing a child, my creation. I see my brushstrokes expand and blur as I do the same. The obsessively neat detail as I clung to a part of me that was there before the baby and to all the images and ideals of who I should be. The smudges an acceptance and celebration of the present: my increasingly mobile child, the end of breastfeeding, and my hazy idea of identity. And yet, as this physical cycle of womanhood closes, I found that I was pregnant yet again, waiting at the door for it to open once more and remind me of how much of a giver I was created to be.



Figure 9. "...And I saw that it was Good. 30" x 45," 2016, painting of boy against orange background. Courtesy of Courtney Tyler.

### Exploring Limitations, (In)forming Motherhood

I often joke with friends that I was not a feminist until I became a mother. Previously, I considered feminism and motherhood, particularly the homemaker, to be at odds with one another. In truth, I did hold feminist values, but I did not understand how important feminist movements were to my choices as a mother or the development of my identity. I had not considered how society's views on motherhood would push and pull at my own identity in motherhood and femininity. As a teacher, I am now keenly aware of how I am talking about and including mothers both verbally and nonverbally—through images. Successful women are not always single and childfree. Successful mothers are not always heterosexual, cisgender, White, or middle class. My views and depictions of mothers are more textured, which I hope will be students' broadened perceptions too with the art about motherhood I share with students.<sup>5</sup> In creating these images of my own experience, I became hyperaware of how particular motherhood experiences are. I endured hardships yet enjoyed privileges through my White, nondisabled, heteronormative identities. Breastfeeding can (in)form mothering identities. Yet just as these experiences are diverse and influenced by certain privileges, it is important to remember that mothers are made through other experiences, too—such as adoption, surrogacy, pregnancy loss, etc.

Dominant narratives of motherhood are limited and limiting. They are limited in their diversity; and limiting in how divergent narratives are compared to the narrow norm. My own painted images, though, are not meant to represent every woman's experience. However, through the process of creating, I am informed of how my own visual story is limited by societal pressures and norms—and limiting others by perpetuating certain norms. I must seek out diverse narratives. As a teacher and visual storyteller, I must uplift a variety of voices; as one artist, image, or person cannot speak for every experience. When creating and

<sup>5</sup> As I teach pre-service early childhood educators, I am particularly mindful of how I can challenge them to think critically about visual culture in classrooms. Each semester, we explore the visual narrative within children's books (who is being represented, who is not, how will students relate or be challenged by the relationships and environments depicted). When it comes to motherhood, now, I seek to find examples of mothering figures that don't simply mirror myself but illustrate many mothering experiences, including men who mother. In doing so, I challenge students to take a critical eye towards all visuals in elementary classrooms and the gaps present between media depictions and students' lived experiences.

choosing images, I want my students to consider how intersections between race, socioeconomics, gender, sexuality, among other characteristics, can impact not only how it was made, but how an image is viewed, shared, and perpetuates (or shatters) expectations.

My research on motherhood and identity has yet to conclude. I am interested in looking further outward, into the connection between artmaking and identity building. I wonder how combinations of creating and reflection can empower diverse mothering experiences and uplift voices while acknowledging limitations and privileges. As Sturken and Cartwright (2001) argued, visual representations construct meaning of the material world. Indeed, if images are not stagnant but vibrating “actants” upon their viewers (Bennett, 2010), how might the very process of creating transform the creator?

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#### About the Author

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