



Meditations on messmates and motherhood

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I attempt to connect with Jahne Pasco-White's *messmates* (2019) from a relative physical distance, from a city of seven mountains on the southwestern coast of Norway, having never set foot in her native Australia. The mostly earthy and fleshy colour palette of her eleven overlapping panels spanning more than 25-meters in length evokes images of the topography of her surroundings. Despite the distance I am brought into an intimate contact with the pixels of her artwork as they appear on my computer screen, thrilled by the personal connections her conceptual framework evokes while wishing for the possibility to experience the sculptural and spatial elements of this piece in person.

Embodied kinship

In dialogue with biologist, multi-species feminist theorist and environmentalist Donna Haraway's (2016) concepts of *making kin* and *messmates*, Jahne Pasco-White names her experience of pregnancy, childbirth and mothering as her inspiration for this body of work. Haraway speaks of 'making kin' as a way to establish new lines of 'response-ability' between all living beings and her brand-like slogan 'Make kin, not babies!' is a call to extend the web of connections between species beyond ancestry and genealogy. As Haraway (2008, 3-4) marvels:

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, ...I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to become with many.

Like Haraway, then, the artist ponders upon how human kin 'should be activated across blood ties as well as be intergenerational, not confined to any prescribed limits of the nuclear family' (Pasco-White 2019). Linking this thought directly to her bodily experience of carrying, birthing and caring for a child, Pasco-White (2019) contends that becoming a mother 'demanded that I took notice of others with whom I was already co-constituted' and that thus making kin is 'an unfolding process of becoming with my young *and* myriad messmates'. In her case, coming to love messmates seems to be more a gradual process of discovery through the personal bodily experience of birthing and mothering rather than the giddy affection that Haraway professes towards our messmates.

In addition to referring to the populous bacterial companions, messmate has other meanings as well: in a naval context, it refers to a person one shares communal

accommodation with. In south-eastern Australia it is another name for a stringybark common to the region that tends to grow among other species (Johnson 2019). Such associations with the idea of community, sharing and exchange—between the human and the non-human, nature and culture—direct us towards an ethic of symbiosis that shakes the foundations of hierarchies as fixed and given. This makes the artwork deeply feminist and concerned with questions of the environment as being inseparable from questions of motherhood.

‘The painting has a sort of ‘mother’, like vinegar’

As a feminist scholar who recently became a mother, I find myself searching for other women’s reflections on motherhood and mothering. There is a sense in which this topic speaks to me now in ways I could never have understood before, so I eagerly embrace Pasco-White’s invitation to ponder upon the symbiosis between messmates and motherhood.

Indeed, feminism has viewed motherhood as a prime site to explore as well as construct boundaries between nature and culture. For instance, radical feminist Shulamith Firestone (2003/1970) infamously argued in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, that women would never be free of patriarchy until they were freed from the physical subjugation of childbirth and suggested we invest in advanced technology to create babies in mechanical uteruses. In contrast, Adrienne Rich (1986) claimed that the source of women’s oppression was not the actual experience of mothering but the patriarchal notion of motherhood. At the same time, taking into account the history of eugenics and forced sterilization, black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2005) drew attention to how it was, in fact, white women who saw motherhood as the ultimate apparatus of patriarchy while women of colour saw freedom and agency in motherhood.

I learn about the intricate elements of Pasco-White’s *messmates* from others who have written about this particular exhibition and who have closely observed her techniques of putting her paintings together. They fill in the gaps for me left by a camera lens that can never quite capture how a painting really *feels* like or even fully looks like, no matter how much it tries to zoom in on the details. Sometimes we need words to see better. As Helen Johnson (2019) writes in her catalogue essay, ‘there is painting here rather than paintings, swathes and skins that overlap and connect, give and take’. I learn that the artist ‘experiments with the layers and folds of loose canvases, which she plasters with wax, resin and found materials’

(Abdulrahim 2019). I reflect on how ‘there is an intermingling of fabrics both natural and synthetic, of drawing, dry and wet application of pigment, of language and cuts, as well as the fog of Jahnne’s breath, and her skin cells, oils and sweat no doubt, from working in an uninsulated summer studio’ (Johnson 2019). There is no focal point or center piece, just various matter that flows in symbiosis with other matter. The artwork is a co-production of the human and non-human material.

A critic notes that the artwork ‘mirrors the fermentation process’ and it has a ‘sort of ‘mother’, like vinegar’ (Johnson 2019). In this reading, the artist acts as a facilitator between different materials coming together, cutting large sections of canvas when a work becomes too full and feeding fresh canvas to it again to keep it proliferating. She creates, according to Johnson (2019), ‘a condition under which the work emerges’. This analogy of the artist as “mother’, like vinegar’, makes me look at *messmates* as a living and constantly evolving matter, rather than a discretely bounded creature, with no clear beginning or end. The mother of vinegar is a substance composed of a form of cellulose and acetic acid bacteria that develops on fermenting alcoholic liquids with the help of oxygen from the air. The artist is then actually more than a facilitator who is just enacting an idea of messmates in this artwork. She is ‘the vinegar’ as she is *becoming with* the messmates that allow the painting to emerge. In a sense then, this analogy mirrors the artist’s Harawayan reflections on pregnancy, birthing and mothering, acknowledging that she in fact co-produces kin together with the messmates.

Curiously, in her statement, the artist avoids directly picking up on the critique some feminists—particularly but not exclusively those on the maternal track—have launched against Haraway’s ‘Make kin, not babies!’ slogan. For example, elsewhere Jennifer Mae Hamilton (2017, 187) expresses her concern over how easily it can slide into debates about population control, paternalistic colonialism and even eugenics that all attract patriarchal and moralizing positions. She wonders:

[i]s population alone the origin of the ecological crisis or is this crisis a result of the volumes of food and pharmaceuticals delivered to us by fossil fuels? [...] Is this new manifesto something feminists should rise to (our own children notwithstanding) or is this an example of a non-reproductive woman chiding others, in particular economically disadvantaged women of

non-Western nations, for their reproductive fertility without so much as acknowledging the fossil fuelled-intensive basis of her own privilege? (Hamilton 2017, 187).

Predictably, Haraway (2016, 208) makes several gestures to take account of systemic colonialism, capitalist austerity, white-supremacy, and their manifestations in the form of reproductive stratification when elaborating on her slogan. She notes (correctly) that many people she holds dear ‘hear neo-imperialism, neoliberalism, misogyny, and racism (who can blame them?) in the ‘Not Babies’ part of ‘Make Kin Not Babies’. This suggests a certain incommensurability between her two political projects, or what Jennifer Mae Hamilton (2017, 187) terms ‘her on-going allegiance to feminism, with its commitment to a woman’s right to control her fertility (including having babies if she wants them), and her parallel investment in a multispecies future in which human offspring have no more value than the offspring of any other critter’. However, while Haraway does not make it her task to comprehensively address the issues of women’s reproductive rights and population control, the way she stakes out her territory underlines a fresh take on her commitment to multi-species environmental justice that is truly pro-child as opposed to ‘the crazy pronatalist but actually antichild world in which we live’ (Haraway in O’Neill-Butler 2016). By thinking of making kin as a way of making babies ‘rare, nurtured, and precious’ and kin ‘abundant, unexpected, enduring, and precious’, Haraway (2016, 208) shows how all mortal critters on earth have the power to resist the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene.

Haraway’s critics aside, paying attention to the intersections of the temporal and the material, as well as the continual processes of decay and renewal, positions Jahnne Pasco-White’s *messmates* in conversation with contemporary feminist new materialism which acknowledges the way all organisms depend on one another in a necessary symbiosis and seeks to resist the progressive devastation of the planet (Haraway 2016). There is a desire here to reflect on how we can live together in symbiosis between beings of every species and nature.

Motherhood is in the air

As another noted painter, Helen Johnson (2019), remarks there is a sense in which art about motherhood tends to be boring. Admittedly, there is a danger of falling into a banal, sentimental depiction or romanticized glorification of motherhood as a symbol of selflessness and sacrifice. Similarly, writer Rachel Cusk (2002, 3) speaks of:

[...] the gloomy suspicion that a book about motherhood is of no real interest to anyone except other mothers; and even then only mothers who, like me, find the experience so momentous that reading about it has a strangely narcotic effect. I say ‘other mothers’ and ‘only mothers’ as if in apology: the experience of motherhood loses nearly everything in its translation to the outside world.

Hence, with the contention that something gets lost in translation, I am also keen on zooming in on the potential resonances between my own experience of carrying, birthing and caring for a new human which I co-produced together with the multitude of messmates, and Pasco-White’s large-scale painting(s) inspired by her experience of the same.

In addition to the Haraway cue that the artist gives us, I very much connect to her work through my meditations on time, continuity and change, the body and mortality, the environment and climate change that so captivated me in those early days of motherhood throughout last winter and spring. Back then my family and I lived in Tartu, Estonia and I used to take long walks in the parks along the River *Emajõgi* (Mother River) as my son was peacefully sleeping in the stroller. Our stroller strides were the moment in the busy day that allowed me to feel like myself again, to hear myself again, as we were walking in sync with the minute daily changes that are the rhythm of nature. On some Fridays, we walked past the students gathering with the school strike for climate change signs on town hall square, inspired by the teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg. We always continued towards the river, sometimes covered by ice and snow, sometimes revealing the water shimmering in rays of light, smelling of the hope of spring, only to be reverting back to the cold dampness of grey winter the next day. Once we were even caught in a sudden 15-minute snow blizzard that made the whole world around us disappear completely. Then just as suddenly the sky cleared up and the sun appeared, as if none of the debilitating chaos a moment ago ever happened. Nothing of that felt usual or in place. Estonian schoolchildren (or indeed Estonian adults) do not normally go on strikes. Winters around here are not usually so unpredictable. That experience of weathering, of feeling forces of nature on my skin and in my bones, was my time for reconnecting with myself, with my hopes to return to creative life postpartum as I was spending my days and nights consumed by the raw newness of infant care.

In those heady days, my mind kept racing back to Kate Zambreno’s words about pregnancy and mothering: ‘I’ve never felt more full of life and death’ (Zambreno in Manguso 2019). Accepting that throughout pregnancy I was carrying new life but also future death all at once in the midst of trying to keep this new life alive and myself with it, at awe with how aliveness and mortality took on a new meaning and how my countless messmates, mostly aiding me but also at one point working against me, were always part of that story. I was never alone in the process of growing a new human. As the American poet and feminist Adrienne Rich (1986, 11) put it,

[a]ll human life on the planet is born of woman. The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman’s body ... Most of us first know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman. We carry the imprint of this experience for life, even into our dying.

Lately, as many have noted, motherhood seems to be enjoying something of a spotlight in the arts, literature and mainstream media. Leah Sandals (2018) talks about 2018 as ‘a big year for motherhood in the arts in North America’, mentioning Carmen Winant’s exhibition *My Birth* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, widely viewed online documentary *Artist and Mother* as well as the feminist artists and mothers Audre Lorde (1973), Adrienne Rich (1986) and Mary Kelly who have paved the way. At the same time, the new spate of thoughtful books on motherhood that Lauren Elkin (Elkin 2018) of *The Paris Review* has commented on makes me wonder what does this recent upsurge of writing and painting say about the current concept of motherhood? What sort of a moment is this in which to pose critical questions about motherhood? What about it seems to be in need of updating, reviewing, reconsidering? These questions often seem to arise in relation to ecology as the looming threats to our planet turn attention to mothers.

Yet as Adrienne Rich (1986, 11) famously noted, and I think it still rings true, ‘[w]e know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood’. Jahnne Pasco-White’s process of painting, cutting and layering of canvas as a contemplation on messmates and motherhood adds a new layer upon layer to artistic and academic work on motherhood. There is a sense in which she uncovers the entanglement of motherhood with a changed perception

of time. Drawing attention to co-producing genealogical kin with the messmates during pregnancy and mothering, Pasco-White becomes absorbed in exploring the passing of time, its fragmentation due to the need to take care of a newborn while nurturing one’s own creativity, trying to make peace with time’s continuity. This reminds me of Sarah Manguso (2015, 94) in *Ongoingness* where the |writer explores her compulsion to commandeer time through diary writing and how it changed with the birth of her son. For Manguso, diary writing is a way to ‘digest the time that passes, file it away so I no longer need to think about it’. Pasco-White digests time through painting so she can continue thinking about it. Her take on motherhood is attentive to embodiment, the ways in which we are bodies in the world and how the world is in our bodies.

Since I began writing this essay a while back, I cannot help but think of Jahnne Pasco-White’s artwork in light of the apocalyptic images of burning Australia that flood my computer screen now, at the beginning of 2020. The meaning of climate change shifts to crisis as the toxic air and flames hurt people as well as non-human animals. They hurt all life on the planet. We could easily weave the concern for the destruction of the planet, critique of capitalism, the oppression of the traditional family and gender roles and maintenance labour into the story of kinship, motherhood and Pasco-White’s *messmates* but I fear that this would be unnecessarily reductive. Her painting(s) should not be viewed as an excuse to get into an academic treatise about women, nature, the environment and politics. Pasco-White’s exhibition *messmates* is more than a mere illustration of these themes; it embodies a deeply felt *becoming-with* these timely and untimely questions alike.

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