

Reflections on Collaboration as Performance and the Performance of Collaboration in an Age of COVID and Climate Crisis

by Natalie Loveless and Sheena Wilson

This short reflection is on feminist collaboration and resilience in an age of COVID and climate change, which, in this text we refract through the lens of performance—not performance as a representative practice (a work of theatre or performance art; a crafted aesthetic practice) but performance as an interruptive capacity within the fabric of everyday life. After situating ourselves geographically and genealogically, we reflect on the way we met, our shared interest in the conjunction of maternal ethics and climate justice action, and collaboration as a situated practice and a mode of public performance that we harness to remake the institutions we inhabit.

Over the past six years, our collaborative practice has been grounded in Treaty Six Territory, in Alberta, Canada, where we met as professors at the University of Alberta. Sheena, a descendant of settlers who moved from Europe to North America at different intervals over the past 200 years, was born in Alberta into a complex web of settler-Indigenous relations, marked by historical and ongoing colonialism. Natalie was born and bred in Kanien'kehá:ka and Anishinabeg territory, currently known as Montreal, Quebec, a descendant of eastern European Jews escaping persecution at the beginning of the twentieth century and of mid seventeenth-century Acadian settlers (among other inheritance lines) and raised in a society steeped in Indigenous erasure and Franco-Anglo settler infighting. Treaty Six Territory, where we write from, is the traditional home of forty-eight different Indigenous nations (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit). And the city of Edmonton, where we live, is situated on lands long ago stolen from Papaschase and Métis peoples, displacing them through means and methods that led to the loss of culture and lives, as part of our nation's history of genocidal practices. Indeed, a preoccupation with what it means to live and work on these lands, and in these times, and with the question of how to grapple differentially with pasts, presents, and futures—the inheritances,

violences, privileges, and possibilities—that we embody is part of what ongoingly brings us together and focuses us on the questions of feminist collaborative praxis (what that might mean, what it might look like), dissent (the conditions of generative refusal that spark our imagination and mobilize us in the present), and resilience (how to nurture adequate conditions for intersectional and multispecies flourishing and affective capacity)—especially in difficult times such as those we are facing today.

Our collaboration started in May 2016, when we organized a symposium called *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics and the Anthropocene*. With the wildfires in northern Alberta raging and speculation about the links to climate change even in mainstream radio and newspapers, we spent four days co-hosting a group of dynamic feminist scholars presenting their research and thinking together at the intersections of gender, maternal care ethics, and intersectional climate justice. In organizing this event, we were particularly attentive not only to *content*, inviting a cross-section of scholars and artists speaking to the maternal from complex overlapping perspectives—including Indigenous kinship relations, critical disability studies, and anti-reproductive perspectives¹—but also to the *form* of the event: how, through specific material structures and temporal organization, we might better nurture conditions for robust and generative exchange across disciplinary (and sometimes ideological) differences. We did this by attending not only to who was invited to participate and how (including making arrangements for various modes of accessibility and comfort in the space and child care for those travelling with children or funds for child care for those leaving them at home) but to other details of event organization, such as the amount of time to allow between programmed sessions and the availability of a variety of food and drink in comfortable corners to facilitate unexpected connections and encounters with other participants, among other aesthetic considerations. In other words, as those in

the performance world well know, the *how* mattered as much as the *what*. The point of all this was, against the university givens in which we work, to assert the constitutive power of form in shaping the content of our exchanges. For example, rather than being just a backdrop—the entertainment—for our symposium, the disco-womb-like structure of Danish artist Lise Haller Baggesen's *Mothernism* (2013) installation was its *site*.

The installation created an intimate space where we worked intensely to rally our shared feminist, maternal theorizing around issues of art, storytelling, and climate change, exploring the possibilities that arise if we take seriously a feminist ethics of care.² We understand this as central to our feminist methodology.

There, we featured a film called *Petro-Mama: Mothering in a Crude World* that Sheena had recently made, informed by her years of work on human rights, which she suddenly saw playing out in new ways as a mother of two young children suffering climate-induced asthma.

Petro-Mama explores the distress of a mother rushing her sick preschooler to the doctor against the backdrop of congested traffic in an oil refinery community (Wilson). Although this has not been scientifically proven, at least not yet, the doctor nonchalantly referred to the forest fires burning around them as the cause of respiratory problems in many of his patients; he named what we could all feel in our bodies: the toxicity of this time is changing the landscape of our lives, even at the cellular level. While Sheena was

developing *Petro-Mama*, Natalie was working on twinned projects called *New Maternalisms* (2014; see *New Maternalisms*, “About”) and *Maternal Ecologies* (2010): artistic research projects organized at the intersection of feminist politics and performance art, which emerged from her need to find new ways of understanding her daily experience as an artist-mother-theorist working in the academy who found herself both unwilling and unable to separate her status as mother from her status as artist and academic, at a time when the topic of the feminist maternal seemed to have fallen into the background of both the academy and the artworld.

In other words, at the same time, in different corners of the university, we were both producing research-creationally informed media works dealing with the maternal as both an ethics and a politics.³ This connection, through the feminist maternal, instigated our collaborative path. For both of us, however, the research was never just about the maternal; rather, the maternal was a situated, potent, and urgent site for interrogating our local conditions of labour and affect as feminists, mothers, scholars, and artists. In these contexts, we work as reproductive social agents looking to inhabit our networks of reproduction differently, challenging their givens—whether these be our relationships as treaty people; the socio-sexual divisions of labour fought, won, lost, and remade iteratively over the generations preceding us (and, as we age, the generations that follow); or our local conditions as reproductive agents within the university.



Participants engaging with Lise Haller Baggesen's *Mothernism* installation for *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene*, 2016. Photo by Michael J. H. Woolley (newmaternalisms.ca and lisehallerbaggesen.wordpress.com/motherism)

All of our work comes back to how we politicize and render each other *capacious* and *capable* (to draw on the work of feminist philosopher Isabelle Stengers) in our knowledge-making-and-sharing practices, and how we negotiate the production of more livable and just worlds. And at this historical moment, the inescapable context for this work is one of both COVID and ecological uncertainty, for ourselves, our children, and our children's children. No one knows what will hit next, or how quickly climate disasters will accelerate, or whether we are now in for a whole cascade of pandemics. We certainly hope not. This period has been hard. It is hard. While we have been working together for about six years co-leading projects, giving shared talks, and writing collaboratively, we also live next door to each other. To varying degrees, we co-parent, co-live, and co-dream and sometimes co-vent, co-drink, and co-cry. And up until recently, under CO-VID, we did what our Chief Medical Officer of Alberta, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, dubbed “co-hort” (Franklin). For the vast majority of the pandemic to date, we were fortunate to be able to cohort-isolate: affect and theory, politics and labour, work, art, and life all intersecting, bursting into each other's territory and pushing us off-kilter, out of orbit, and disorienting us on a regular basis. Indeed, collaboration is not for the faint of heart. Sometimes, we disagree and pull in different directions. Sometimes, we think that we are headed in the same direction, but then one of us darts a different way. These are the perils of genuine collaboration, when it is engaged as a remaking/recalibrating rather than additive method. But these are also its joys. For collaboration, in its emergent dynamism, pulls us out of the isolating neoliberal subjectivity that is, despite critique and resistance, constitutive of the dominant modes that govern much of our labour as academics.

Indeed, COVID is deepening social isolation and temporarily weakening—if not permanently fracturing—many community ties; political interests are exploiting this moment to push through policies that will yet further erode job security and the social fabric of our societies. Whether it is these politics of alienation, or ongoing practices of colonization, or rampant forest fires, or other extreme weather events, or COVID, these are the aspects of the new normal that fill us with horror and abjection. But we are also very grateful for the resilience created at the microlevel of the everyday, and the political resilience at the community scale, or even the larger political scale that can be created through collaborative encounters and relationships that leaves us working in less (not more) alienation. Being involved in feminist collaborative praxis—artistic and community engaged—as not only the subject of our research, but as a process of being and doing in the world is what makes us resilient to the blows we are subjected to over the long term. But how does one collaborate under COVID when the pandemic demands isolation to slow the curve, and when the powers-that-be—those who have gotten to where they are by mobilizing the very antithesis of collaborative care praxis—are using COVID to shape the future to their benefit and profit? This is what our current research asks. Our wager is that there are ways: by forging collaborative intersectional accomplice relationships (Indigenous Action Media) among feminists (of all genders) focused on a range of political issues that aim to decolonize in multiple forms that include unsettling, queering, and ultimately transforming our immediate spheres of influence, our institutions, public life, and even global policy.⁴

Collaborations are hard, and they take work, but they function as sites of resistance because the work of collaboration is different from what the neoliberal imperatives are asking of us.⁵



Installation of part 1 of *Maternal Ecologies, Maternal Prescriptions*, for the *Complicated Labours* exhibition at the Sesnon Gallery, 2014.

Photo by Naohmi Monroe (maternalecologies.ca and people.ucsc.edu/~ilusztig/complicated_labors/about.html)



Speculative Energy Futures research team discussing *Prototypes for Possible Worlds* at the FAB Gallery, 2019.
Photo by Satoshi Ikeda (justpowers.ca/projects/speculative-energy-futures)

Living through this moment of climate change crisis—living on a dying planet—is about being able to remake ourselves in a world in which historical progress is no longer the yardstick by which we can speculate about the future and in which we can no longer rely on the most recent historical models of doing (Nichols; Tsing). Let us name them: hetero-patriarchal, petro-capitalist, settler-colonial structures, organized by private property and the nuclear family, each with their own reproductive valence and modes of violence. As we grasp for a means of resistance and resilience adequate to the contemporary moment, let us all turn, collaboratively and with care, to each other and incite capacities to keep advocating for a different way of doing, wherever and however we can.

This is what Donna Haraway famously calls “staying with the trouble,” and it is something that we work to do wherever we are, and however we can, not only at the level of the content of our interventions and arguments but also at the level of form: ecological, responsive, and collaborative. All of our words here exist in a strange in-between place in which it isn’t obvious which one of us has authored or initiated what. And, of course, all of our thinking exists in our wider networks of situated knowledge making and kinship relations within our communities of living and knowing. And it is precisely this collaborative dis-articulation, one that we link to the relational enmeshment at the heart of the feminist maternal, that we ongoingly endeavour to perform. We do so in the context of COVID, which has rendered acute what those

of us working on climate-related issues in the academy have long known: that the neoliberal reproductive logics of the university must change. Feminist collaboration—in life, in art, and in the academy—is therefore our chosen mode of resilience.

Notes

- 1 See Clarke and Haraway. For a full list of participants, see New Maternalisms, “Participants.”
- 2 On feminist care ethics for the twenty-first century, see Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s 2017 book *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics for a More than Human World*.
- 3 We understand maternal care ethics as non-binary, enmeshed, relational, and ecological. See Ettinger on matrixial ethics. See also Spatz.
- 4 As we are doing in our current collaborative project, *Speculative Energy Futures*.
- 5 This is not to ignore the ways that the terms of interdisciplinarity and collaboration are regularly mobilized toward neo-liberal ends within university spaces. On this, see Loveless and Smith.

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