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The Feminine Outsider: Resistance through the Feminist Imaginary

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“...we will dream our way out; we must imagine beyond the given.”
(Butler, Davies et al., 2022, p. 16)

The feminist imaginary is a space of resistance against patriarchal structures of oppression and the silencing of women’s voices and histories. It inspires transformation through new possibilities and untold narratives. Ultimately, the feminist imaginary mobilizes collective co-creations of knowledge, meaning and activism to speak to contemporary womanism.

My concern relates to ageing women and ageing maternal identities including those engaged in mothering practices. Notions of Othering through cultural feminine ageing stereotypes will be discussed and also related to ageing mother stereotypes.

Included here are two of my art works. A creative writing piece entitled *The Pink Bonnet* (2023), which demonstrates a process of writing to surface experience and ideas. Another is shown here as photographic documentation of a live, multisensory installation entitled *Reach* (2021). *Reach* incorporates two materials: industrial steel floor grating and raw yeast bread dough. The written and visual pieces do not illustrate but respond to ideas related to the ageing feminine and ageing maternal. Overall, states of becoming and potential transformation are key themes. I also discuss Othering in relation to the formation of states of self from psychoanalytic and philosophical approaches, including de Beauvoir (1949), and Bracha L. Ettinger (2006) with matrixial subject theory. A touchstone is Octavia Butler’s quotation (above), which I position within the feminist imaginary, emphasises the need to dream and imagine in order to resist oppression for empowerment.

Considering my position as a researcher and creative practitioner, I am a white, cis-gendered woman. I recognize my own privilege, which enables me to even imagine ideas of transformation. I try to resist the confined spaces of Eurocentric, heteronormative epistemologies. The term maternal subjectivities is open to biological and non-biological mothers with the emphasis on mothering practices (Baraitser, 2009, p.20). The term motherwork is used to refer to biological and non-biological mothers involved in the mothering of children. I acknowledge that maternal subjectivities are gendered since they refer to women who are engaged in childcare practices. This is relevant because of the way they engage with historical and current female mothering identities (Ruddick, 1997, p. 206). Significantly the bulk of mothering work is still carried out by women. Considering the shaping of maternal identities, the psychologist Wendy Hollway (2001) states that this formation is due to the structuring of the gendered mother subject through the relationship with the child (Hollway, 2001, as cited in Baraitser, 2009, p.20). Thus, it is paramount that these types of women’s identities and ways of being are not lost in contemporary tensions around gender identities.

In relation to older age generally, it is important to mention that societal and cultural contexts vary depending on the values of cultures, regions, contexts and practices. According to Kornadt et al. (2022), “Socio-ecological and cultural factors in which countries differ are imperative contexts of human thought and behaviour” (Kornadt, 2022, p. 4). For example, older adults can be seen negatively in relation to health and physical appearance, compared to other positive areas such as family and personality. This is of course, then also dependent on geographic regions. While this is a significant area of research it lies beyond the scope of this discussion.

For context, sixty-five is generally taken as a marker for the start of older age in the UK, probably due to the traditional official retirement age although this no longer applies (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021).

Various cultural perceptions and stereotypes are described in Susan Sontag's essay *The Double Standards of Aging* (1972), where she states that ageing is culturally difficult for women compared to men because of the cultural pressures on youthful appearance (Rieff, 2023, p. 5). Sontag continues by pinpointing a number of negative stereotypes that culturally characterize the feminine, and significantly the ageing feminine, including "... helplessness [and] passivity ..." (Rieff, 2023, p.7). Other stereotypes I focus on see ageing women as sick, sexless and outsiders as highlighted by Kathleen Woodward (1990). Notably she points out the still influential Freudian framing where ageing women are perceived as sick – in a state of decline, sexless – undesirous and undesiring and missing (Woodward, 1990, p. 150). From this perspective, missing can mean that ageing women are viewed as outsiders and are thereby Othered.

Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir, in *Old Age* (1970), describes a cultural ambivalence towards older people generally, where they are required to display virtuousness and serenity. If they show the same desires as the young however, they are perceived with "disgust" and "absurdity" (de Beauvoir, 1970, p. 10). Furthermore, Sontag again discusses this idea of ageing women and disgust in relation to youthfulness by saying "One of the attitudes that punish women most severely is the visceral horror felt at aging female flesh" (Sontag, 1970, as cited in Reiff, 2023, p. 30). Sontag stresses the cultural value placed on women's appearance in terms of youth which is not experienced by men in the same way.

Briefly, I mention positive lived experience of ageing women rather than cultural stereotypes which are well recorded. For example, Corolyn G. Heilbrun (1997), at age seventy looks to her sixties and describes feeling more herself, with less conflict, more happiness and overall "more powerful" (Heilbrun, 1997, p. 6). Notably, this experience is contingent on a number of factors. These include a privileged socio-economic and educational background which Heilbrun recognizes (Heilbrun, 1997, p. 2). Nevertheless, my aim is to look at cultural perceptions of feminine ageing through the sick, sexless, outsider stereotypes because of their dominance in this society and their potential influence in shaping states of self and personal narratives. This influence is argued by Anna E. Kornadt et al., (2020), who says that cultural contexts (which for me include cultural perceptions) impact on states of self. "... even though ageing can be considered a biological process, it does not happen in a vacuum, and is shaped by societal and cultural contexts... which then translate into the views that people have of their own and others aging" (Kornadt et al., 2020, p. 3).

Perhaps it is also possible to see the discriminatory ageing stereotypes in relation to the maternal. For instance, taking the sick stereotype as positioned within a medicalized discourse, Rosemary Betterton (2014), states that "The maternal body is constructed as a site for regulation and control through medical practices and reproductive technologies..." (Betterton, 2014, p.4). Betterton also highlights extreme cultural perceptions and representations of the maternal from the religious perspective, where they are elevated and idealised to the monstrous and grotesque (Betterton, 2014, p. 136). All of these cultural perceptions which impact on identity and personal narrative construction deny specificity within the experience of ageing and of mothering. It is vital that these stereotypes are resisted because of the huge part they play in the ways women are Othered and oppressed. The intention is that my creative practice, within the feminist imaginary, can articulate more meaningful experiences of ageing and mothering as a contribution to the many voices of resistance.

Materialising reach

The main material in *Reach* - raw yeast bread dough (with food colouring) - is unruly, messy and acts on smell, touch, sound, as well as sight. In terms of materiality, the raw yeast bread dough in *Reach* can be said to have a type of agency. Accordingly, the political theorist Jane Bennett views materials as having vitality - the capacity to act as types of agents and forces with "trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own." (Bennett, 2010, p. viii). Therefore, it is possible to see intra-relations within the dough itself arising through active chemical processes. These involve fermentation and, later, stages of decay. Notably, I regard decay as another life stage of the organisms within the dough. Thus, the dough can be viewed as being in a continual state of change where "... matter becomes" rather than "matter is"... (Cool & Frost, 2010, p. 10). So perhaps ageing can be viewed as a state of becoming, rather than a state of diminishment as suggested by the feminine aging stereotypes mentioned above.

The changes in the bread dough lead me to imagine states of becoming. For a literal example, take the menopause life stage, the end of reproductive years in women, which includes chemical changes in hormonal activity (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). This may be viewed as a state of becoming and a new life stage. The WHO (2022), also describes the menopause as “... one point in a continuum of life stages for women ...” (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). This resonates for me because of the focus on the idea of continuum and life stages. I try to resist mainstream narratives of the menopause, as circulated by governmental and public services, because they often use medicalized discourses which refer to symptoms and treatments (National Health Service [NHS], 2022). I prefer to talk about the menopause as a set of characteristics and as a state of becoming.



Figure 1: Reach detail (own photography)

The process of making the raw yeast bread dough relates to the often culturally unacknowledged labour of mothering practices because the labour involved in making the dough is not seen either. This idea of the unseen can also be connected to the airborne fungal spores within the yeast of the dough, which are microscopic and reproductive particles invisible to the naked eye; it could be said that mothering is invisible, but pervasive.



Figure 2: Reach (own photograph)

Reminiscent of feminist collective methods, large quantities of raw yeast bread dough are made by people from my community, mostly women, who share complex feelings about ageing and mothering. A poetic and physical articulation of the haptic sense of touch is imprinted into the dough. A multiplicity of experience is captured and intermingles in the dough. It is my aim that *Reach* can provide a space for bringing together experiences in a multi-sensory and thought-provoking way (see Figure 1).

As a conceptual and aesthetic counterpoint, the dough is placed on five 1m x 1m steel floor grids. Figure 2 shows the grids suspended just above head height so that what is usually the floor becomes the ceiling. This inversion disrupts the engagement with the architectural space. I think this helps to create a disorientation in the audience, promoting more effective encounters with the piece. The dough moves through the grating landing on the floor. The audience is invited to engage with the installation by standing close to or under the structure and touching the dough on the floor. The dough is formless. It does not adhere to any forced shape. It moves freely through the steel floor grating evoking an emancipatory sense. From a feminist imaginary perspective, the dough might act as a metaphor for something which has a type of agency and is breaking away from containment. Furthermore, this could articulate positive ideas of ageing with a sense of freedom from oppressive, traditional cultural perceptions and norms (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: *Reach* detail (own photograph)

The main ideas manifested in *Reach* engage with ageing feminine subjectivity and maternal subjectivity situated within the patriarchal ideology. By subjectivity I mean the psychoanalytic construction of meaningful interior selves which affect all aspects of life and being. When talking about the ageing feminine and the maternal, I am referring to the co-existence of multiple selves which form as we age and engage in mothering children (Moglen, 2008, as cited in Segal, 2013, p. 28). I view the two categories of feminine and maternal not as separate but as porous, in constant relational change (Baraitser, 2009, p. 20). Figure 4 shows the dough settled on the floor where it lies in various stages of chemical change and decay, a multiplicity of porous elements which allude to ideas of potential transformation.



Figure 4: Reach (own photograph)

Feminine outsider

Considering feminine identity and the perception of the outsider, I look at ideas of Othering. de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), theorises the construction of the feminine as Other in relation to the masculine. Later in life, in *Old Age* (1970), she raises the complexities of ageing within the self and society by stating that generally old age is something to be rejected, placed outside society and is viewed as a “... foreign species ...” (de Beauvoir, 1970, p. 315). This can be related to ideas of the outsider and Othering.

When looking at Othering in terms of women’s internalization of ageing and the relationship between external societal perceptions, again de Beauvoir comments on her own subjectivity. She argues that there is a tension between Othering through initial construction of self and another form of Othering which occurs in old age. She asserts that “... my being as he defines it objectively and the awareness of myself, I acquire by means of him” (de Beauvoir, 1970, p. 316). Hence theoretically, even though the feminine is contingent on the masculine, an awareness of herself is still possible. She offers up a type of doubling notion of Othering when she argues that “Within me it is the Other – that is to say the person I am for the outsider – who is old: and that Other is myself” (de Beauvoir, 1970, p. 316). de Beauvoir seems to be saying that from the outside she is perceived as different and ageing, probably due to appearance, but inside her sense of self is unchanged. Once again there is an underlining sense of her own subjectivity. Moreover, she also highlights that ageing has two aspects of the self; one perceived from the outside, which is likely to relate to appearance, while the other is an internal understanding. So according to de Beauvoir, there is scope for the existence of meaningful states of self even accepting the doubling notion of feminine and ageing Othering.

Another aspect of Othering is particularly relevant to motherhood because motherhood is societally restrained by patriarchal normative structures resulting in idealised mothering practices (O’Reilly, 2021, p. 10). In attempting to step out of these structures, Othering occurs. I imagine whether it is possible to use this position as a form of resistance against oppression perpetuated by gender and age Othering.

The geriatric mother

As an older mother, commonly termed a geriatric mother (a standard medical term applied to women over the age of thirty-five in the UK) I was already outside the normative mothering model. I did not fit the good mother “fantasy mother” stereotypes. These often include the valiant and idealized, e.g., the mother as hero and religious icon, and the notion of the mother as natural. This version encompasses the appearance of constant unconditional love and availability and self-sacrifice (Baraitser, 2009, p. 52). Clearly, this is another example of cultural stereotypes which influence the shaping of states of self and personal narratives.

When discussing maternal subjectivities, I reflect on the potential for the formation of multiple internal subjectivities or states of self. Accordingly, subjectivities can be formed through different encounters including ageing and maternal experiences. Helen Moglen in the essay *Ageing and Transageing* (2008), explores divergent experiences of women and ageing by reflecting on ageing as offering up many different subjectivities or states of self (Moglen (2008), as cited in Segal, 2013, p. 28). A type of revisiting of younger selves or resonances of earlier selves takes place. Similarly, as previously noted by Hollway (2001), it is important to recognize the formation of maternal subjectivities in terms of pre-maternal selves and those states of self which emerge in relation to the child. (Hollway, 2001, as cited in Baraitser, 2009, p.20). Also, I would add, not only in relation to the child.

What follows is the creative writing piece which is a recent response to the experience of giving birth to my daughter twenty-two years ago. A new perspective was provided by Baraitser and Ettinger, instigated by Baraitser’s question “What it is like to encounter a child?” (Baraitser, 2009, p. 17).

The Pink Bonnet

*I am finally still, surgically bound by dressings in big brilliant white cotton pants.
No more jolts, wrenches, or incisions just a numb deep ache
I am pulled into the nauseating sludge of the
linoleum floor. Penned in by the Formica bed locker
the baby, my baby is presented to me
like a bouquet of mystifying flowers.
In that split second, I clock the scratchy, sugar pink,
hand knitted (not by me) bonnet.
When was the last time I said that word? A dim picture –
a five-year-old self absorbed in playing mummies with the rigid Tiny Tears.
Given all the planning for a first baby
pre, and after (not so much during) birth this bonnet is an affront.
Like many things this was not on the plan.
Another decision taken out of my hands.
In an instant I did not fit
the ideal mother with newborn image.
Elaine, the well-meaning midwife with the very familiar face by now
explains the baby will be cold.
Why don't I know that?
And why am I focussing on the wrong things?
Questions uttered too many times in the years to come.
Latching onto my daughter's dark shiny eyes
I am held by their blank deep gaze.
Filled with awe and a rising in my guts like dusky flapping moths.
I was at one and the same time looking at a person I had birthed -
of me but not me.*

(Chester, 2023)

Feminine prisms

The sensation of birthing from one's own body and psyche created a huge shift in my understanding of state of self. To partly address the question "What is it like to encounter a child?" (Baraitser, 2009, p. 17), I refer to Ettinger's matrixial subject theory (2006); a psychoanalytic framing of internal subject object relations in the human psyche. There are two interrelated areas pinpointed here; intra-subjective relations between the mother and child, and the discourse of Othering within the feminine paradigm.

For context briefly, Ettinger is an Israeli born feminist, psychoanalyst and artist who provides a psychoanalytic shift in subject object relations. She reconfigures the feminine and the maternal in response to the symbolic in Freud's Oedipal complex (Pollock, 2004, p. 6), which is later developed by Lacan. The Oedipal complex sees the male child distanced from the mother in favour of the father. By foregrounding the symbolic mother and thereby the feminine Ettinger also responds to Freudian and Lacanian paradigms of the Other which view an independent feminine as absent and symbolically sees the feminine in relation to the masculine. For example, Lacan positions the feminine "outside of" what he terms the symbolic universe; thus the feminine exists as a form of "other-ness" (Ferris, 1993, p. 3).

Additionally, Ettinger further diverges from Freud and Lacan - and is closer to Klein because she prioritizes the mother child relationship. From a Kleinian perspective though, the mother is still not seen independently but viewed in relation to "...those that lay claim on her..." such as the father and the child (Wright, 2002, as cited in Brennan, 1989, p. 145). Also, like Klein, Ettinger emphasises a relational intersubjective perspective (Ettinger, 2006, p. 218). The subject (individual) is formed within inter-subjective relations (paradoxically called subject object relations). This is where subjectivities in individuals are formed through encounters experienced between individuals. Again, this contrasts with Freudian and Lacanian theory in the Oedipus complex which prioritises the subject (individual) development through responses to objects, such as entities, people, things and conditions.

Thinking about Othering in relation to ageing feminine subjectivity and maternal subjectivity, Ettinger uses an intersectional approach which maintains specificity of difference such as those that exist within gender and internal subjectivity construction. This approach positively pinpoints difference and inclusion rather than exclusion, thereby moving away from more traditional and binaried forms of Othering. For example, for Ettinger the subject is still viewed as the "I", but the object (the other person) is seen as the "... non I neither rejected nor assimilated." (Ettinger, 2006, p. 218). This is interesting with regards to the formation of ageing feminine and ageing maternal subjectivity because it opens up new approaches to the way the feminine is traditionally perceived as the Other to the masculine.

The dissolution of traditional Othering occurs partly through the idea of connection, described in what Ettinger terms a psychic space. This is the experience of subjects encountering each other where co-emergence and inclusion take place. This is termed "transsubjectivity" (Pollock, 2004, p. 6). In this understanding it is important to mention a key concept for Ettinger which is connection through compassion (Ettinger, 2006, p. 218). This provides a shift away from engaging with people as Other, and by emphasising connection she is arguing for the emergence of multiple internal selves through compassionate responses with other people. This could indicate that our notion of our multiple sense of self is to some extent dependent on how deeply felt these encounters with people are experienced. I see a resonance here with metaphorical and material readings of *Reach* and the feminist imaginary, where the chemical dynamics of the raw yeast bread dough co-exist in the creation of new bacterial life forms.

A final point on Ettinger takes us to maternal relations, which are symbolically expressed through the symbolic maternal womb; the "intra-uterine experience" (Pollock, 2006, p. 4). The intra-uterine experience is a state experienced within the processes of birth both physically and psychically. Importantly, this theory does not essentialise the maternal body because the complex is viewed as a dimension where psychic encounters occur (Pollock, 2006, p. 9). It can be said that Ettinger

foregrounds the idea of inclusion because we all have an experience of being birthed. Referring again to *Reach* and at the risk of further anthropomorphism, during the making of the bread dough people have said that it has womb like qualities. It seems to connect with a deep visceral experience. I am keen to sidestep the womb and the commonplace empty vessel analogy because of the way it emphasises the womb as a so called “negative space”. However, it seems as though the womb evocation is present anyway, and this time I assert that it is full of dynamism and potential.

The development of subjectivities and the opposition to Othering are linked by compassion, difference and inclusion. Also, by highlighting the intra-uterine complex and the shared experience of being birthed, Ettinger provides thought provoking ideas of the formation of states of self which relate to my experience of giving birth as expressed in *The Pink Bonnet*. I wonder if what I felt in first encountering my daughter was a deep connection which could have resulted in the emergence of an intra-subjective self. The notion of me but not me still echoes.

The feminist imaginary provides a space through which to explore ideas of the ageing feminine and ageing maternal identity. It is acknowledged that these identities and states of self are significantly shaped by socio-contextual factors. It is also recognized that cultural perceptions of ageing, as discussed in the aforementioned stereotypes, come into this category. However, it is important that attempts are made to resist these stereotypes in the exploration of specificity and diversity of perceptions and narratives. I have attempted to do this in various ways.

On reflection it feels as though the ideas I have described around states of becoming and potential transformation relate to notions of Othering, and a shift to less binary thinking has occurred through Ettinger. Her approaches involving intersectional and relational inter-subjectivity through inclusion and compassion offer a shift from traditional binary perspectives; for instance, in the way Ettinger describes the “I” of the subject and the “non-I” of the object – the Other. Also, a change in the use of terms provides multiplicity and feels less binaried, such as a change from using the feminine to femininities. Similarly, Ettinger’s approaches combined with the foregrounding of the maternal symbolic offer ways of exploring maternal states of self and identity not only relationally, within the mother child dynamic, but through encounters beyond the child.

My creative practice is not an illustration of the approaches discussed but it is a process of thinking through and hopefully articulating some important elements. For instance, one of my intentions in using live materials, in this case bread dough, is to surface ideas of changes in life stages and states of becoming. This is a move away from feminine ageing stereotypes of diminishment to focus on life affirming perspectives and potential transformation. I aim to contribute to existing forms of resistance for the emergence and articulation of more meaningful, diverse ageing feminine and maternal narratives. This is a collective, co-created action of resistance which is energised through the feminist aesthetic and imaginary, a critical space which offers hope for the potential transformation and empowerment of women.

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About the Author

Maxine Chester is a practicing artist and a tutor at HE level at the University for the Creative Arts (UCA). She graduated in an MA in Fine Art from UCA in 2021. Maxine's work explores ideas relating to gender inequalities relating to ageing feminine subjectivity and maternal subjectivity through feminist ideas and concepts. She works in multi-disciplinary modes, which includes; painting, soft sculpture and multi-sensory installation using live materials. The ageing feminine and the maternal are seen as constant states of becoming and transformation which is partly suggested by the live materials. The work resists traditional perceptions of ageing and the maternal which are structured within the patriarchal agenda. She aims to re-envision new ways of being to promote women's empowerment.

Maxine exhibits regularly including recent exhibitions at the Halpern Gallery, Nucleus Arts Centre, Medway, and she has shown as part of the Power of Women Festival Thanet. She delivers creative workshops in a range of mediums and presents papers on her practice research at conferences, such as the 'Missing Mother' conference (Bolton University 2021), and the 'Conflict and Creative Practice Conference' (UCA, 2021). Maxine is currently undertaking a practice-based Ph.D. at UCA.

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