The Labourer Revealed
A Comprehensive Support Paper for the Exhibition

A Way of Knowing

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By
Brenda Jane Danbrook
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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

SUPERVISORY AND EXAMINING COMMITTEE

Brenda Jane Danbrook, candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts, has presented a support paper titled, *The Labourer Revealed*, for the Exhibition, *A Way Of Knowing*, in an oral examination held on November 30, 2018. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

External Examiner: Prof. Lyndal Osborne, University of Alberta

Co-Supervisor: Prof. Ruth Chambers, Department of Visual Arts

Co-Supervisor: Prof. Sean Whalley, Department of Visual Arts

Committee Member: Prof. Leesa Streifler, Department of Visual Arts

Committee Member: Prof. Robert Truszkowski, Department of Visual Arts

Chair of Defense: Dr. Troni Grande, Department of English
ABSTRACT

*A Way of Knowing* is an exhibition comprised of nine 3-dimensional mixed media sculptures, made with an emphasis on process and production using traditionally feminine practices and materials, such as sewing and ceramics.

The sculptures in the exhibition all reference my experience as a woman and mother in the context of domestic space. These sculptures explore the idea of female presence and empowerment, through the acts of maternal care and labour, to celebrate the practice of feminist mothering.

This series began with an obsessive practice as a labourer, but explores my identity as a mother, through the lens of “women’s work.” First, I contextualize my process within the social structure of my childhood in 1970s rural Alberta. In childhood, I was taught by my mother to use my hands productively. Domestic and craft practices such as sewing and pottery set the foundation for my love of all materials and the joy of making art.

In the second section of this paper, I explore my role as a mother and the practice of feminist mothering as a means to ensure equality and empowerment. My research is focused on women both as labourer and maternal feminine subject. More specifically, I am interested in how a woman’s identity is formed through a motherline,\(^1\) through which empowerment is found in a domestic space, by feminist mothering. By examining my feminist motherline though my mother’s history and mine, a brief introduction into second wave feminism, and the artwork of artists such as Martha Rosler, Aganetha Dyck, and Judy Chicago, I endeavour to position my art

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practice within a larger context of women’s history in western society in the 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries. Thirdly, I contextualize the exhibition \textit{A Way of Knowing}, with my identity as an artist, and offer a metaphor for “connection, wholeness and strength,”\textsuperscript{2} to a feminist motherline to honour the practice of feminist mothering.

\textsuperscript{2} Beverly Gordon. \textit{Textiles The Whole Story: Uses Meaning Significance}. United Kingdom: Thames & Hudson Ltd. 2013. 23
DEDICATION

To my Mother, Ivy Ann Anderson-Pronk. SHE will forever remain the most resilient and resourceful woman I have ever known.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with great pleasure that I acknowledge and thank my co-supervisors, Sean Whalley and Ruth Chambers, for their guidance and support throughout my graduate studies at the University of Regina. I would like to thank them for all the time and energy they invested to direct the development of this exhibition. I am grateful for the care, guidance, and support I have received from my committee member Leesa Streifler, who empowered me to examine the roots of my feminist identity; she will forever remain my feminist artist mother. I am equally as thankful to my committee member Rob Truszkowksi for his help with facilitating my success in the program and studio. Many thanks to Lyndall Osborne for acting as my external examiner. I am also indebted to Visual Arts Administrative Assistant Joanne Keen for all that she does. I would like to acknowledge the Faculty of of Media, Art and Performance, the Saskatchewan Innovation Opportunity through the University of Regina, and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for opportunities and funding I have received throughout my degree.

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this MFA support paper “The Labourer Revealed” is to expand upon the ideas and themes established in my thesis exhibition A Way of Knowing, which will be presented at the Mackenzie Art Gallery from December 1-9th, 2018. The exhibition consists of six large and three medium-scale, three dimensional sculptures. They are made from mixed media with an emphasis on process and production using traditionally feminine practices and materials, such as sewing and ceramics. All my work, references my experience as a woman and mother in the context of domestic space to explore the idea of an empowered female presence, through the acts of maternal care and labour.

Growing up in rural Alberta in the 1970s, I was taught to use my hands productively by modelling my mother’s actions. The crafting and domestic practices of my childhood set the foundations for a love of materials and making. When I was a young girl, my mother separated from my father to seek higher education and to free herself from the patriarchal oppression\(^3\) that was the foundation of our home. At the age of sixteen I became a single mother, at twenty-one a wife. But because of the feminist values\(^4\) instilled in me by my mother, I used my love of materials, and labour, to establish a craft practice as a means to achieve a level of independence and fulfillment that my mother could not accomplish in her married life.

According to scholars Catherine Carstairs and Nancy Janovicek, in the late 1970s, feminist theorists urged us to reconsider our lives by placing women’s experience at the center of historical analysis. Four decades later, women and artists continue to take up the challenge of

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\(^3\) Patriarchy here refers to “the socially accepted and supported rules of men over women and children through greater status, wealth and power.” (Green, Fiona Joy. Practising Feminist Mothering. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Arbeiter Ring Publishing. 2011. 24.)

\(^4\) Feminism for many entails: “opportunities for women who are not to be treated differently from men because of their gender.” (Green, Fiona J. Fiona Joy Green, Practising Feminist Mothering.117)
empowering women through the examples of their life and work.\(^5\) While my life as a mother plays an important role in my artistic endeavors, through my actions with materials and forms, I reveal how feminist practices and their relationship to empowerment inform my exhibition and expose my proud identity as a female labourer. My labour conveys my essence or presence of “self”; imparting values relating to equality and nurturance to those around me.

The foundation for this work came as I contemplated aspects of my life’s history after my adult children became self-sufficient and emerged from the realization that my mother’s maternal feminist practices and my identity are directly connected. This connection has afforded a transformative experience in my life’s trajectory, and in my daughter’s history. It became clear to me that an interest in feminism and woman as individual and maternal subject, motivated my research. The process of uncovering my feminist identity led me to examine Creating Feminist Motherlines: Feminist Mothers and their Daughters.\(^6\) I am interested in a maternal narrative that links my mother’s history to mine, to show the significance of how feminism and the (re)construction of institutional motherhood\(^7\) changed the course of my history.

Subsequently, feminist mothering practices informed my work, which took form by exploring the idea of a female presence, a term I am using to suggest the essence of a female figure, while referencing my mother’s history, and craft practice and textile metaphors that “expresses connection, wholeness and strength.”\(^8\) The exhibition intends to invite the viewer to

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\(^6\)Fiona Joy Green. Practicing Feminist Mothering. 111

\(^7\)Scholar Adrian Rich in Of Woman Born published in 1976, outlines two overlapping meanings of motherhood, superimposed on each other: “the potential relationship of any women to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential-an all women shall remain under male control.” United States: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1976. 13.

relate to and witness the value of nurturing one another to evoke a space for personal empowerment.

The first section of this paper outlines the influences and methodologies that led to my current body of work. Next, I describe the exhibition, its curation, and provide a physical description of the work and exhibition space. Later, I examine the line between ideologies of feminism that Fiona Joy Green directs towards feminist mothering in her text *Practicing Feminist Mothering*. Following alongside these theoretic discussions, artistic influences will be acknowledged as I position my artwork and perspective within a larger context of feminist artists, such as Martha Rosler, Aganetha Dyck, and Judy Chicago. I also examine the link between my art practice and *Feminist History in Canada* edited by Catherine Carstairs and Nancy Janovicek, based on my mother’s history and my own.

**CHAPTER 1: Evolution of My Practice**

**1.1 The Domestic: A False Start but was it?**

At the beginning of my MFA program in the Fall of 2016, I photographed the insides of two abandoned homes in rural Saskatchewan. This work holds the “thread” of my thesis project; here I began to think about the social structure in which I grew up, the role of the mother and my mother’s extreme rejection of the role imposed upon her. My interests started to focus on women’s work in domestic space, while also acknowledging women’s history regarding power relationships. In my piece *Abandoned*, using a ceramic process of lithography, I transferred the image of the abandoned kitchen onto a handcrafted urn (see fig. 1). Upon the vessels’ completion, I took the urn back to the abandoned space and re-photographed it. When the vessel were displayed, it was accompanied by the new images as documentation.
This work explored the role of a mother or her presence in a domestic space. Essentially, as a result of my labour and affinity with clay, I saw the urn as a representation of myself. By taking the fired urn and putting it back into the abandoned kitchen, I was leaving an empowered mother presence in the domestic space. Because, unlike my mother, I maintain that being a mother and being empowered are not mutually exclusive.

I sought to make visible the maternal space in my childhood home by reflecting upon a personally traumatic event, uncovering and confronting the social structure that we once occupied. I began to realize that what is visible is the institution of motherhood imposed upon my mother, and how she used traditionally feminine practices to feel a sense of empowerment, that was otherwise kept from her.9

1.2 Women’s Work, and the Model of My Mother

I grew up in a nuclear family in small-town rural Alberta. Traditional stereotypical gender roles governed my family. It was my mother’s sole responsibility to be the maternal caregiver of the children and she was thus confined by the institution of Motherhood. According to scholar Fiona Joy Green, motherhood

entails mothering – the interpersonal relations and work involved in raising children that is generally taken up by women – and the prescribed ideals of mothering which are often experienced as oppressive because of the narrowly constituted and institutionalized patriarchal rules and expectations that dictate familial and child rearing roles, responsibilities and relationships among women, children, and men.10 ("Feminist Mothering Practices,"67)

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9Mothering, according to scholar Andrea O’Reilly, can be distinguished as “Women’s experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women.” Andrea O’Reilly. “Feminist Mothering.” Maternal Theory: Essential Reader. New York: Demeter Press. 2007. 794

10Fiona Joy Green. Feminist Mothering Practises. 67
For this paper, the type of women’s work related to mothering is viewed as a construction of motherhood, or what author Susan Maushart outlines in the text *Wifework*, as unpaid domestic service that evolved, she proposes, as a way of redressing the imbalance between the dependency needs of males and females.\(^\text{11}\) My mother modelled feminist mothering by maintaining strength and independence in her work, such as making new clothing from scraps of old clothes. This resourcefulness helped her gain confidence to overcome the barriers of oppression when my father did not give her money to buy us new clothes and demanded that she make the best with what she had. Her burgeoning confidence was hard won and gained through her labour.

For most of my childhood, I modelled her labour, I had an obsessive desire to create objects by hand. Whether it was hand sewing little bits of leftover fabric into Barbie doll clothes, or creating puppets out of recycled scrap materials, my hands were in motion making and sharing through handmade creations. What I now recognize is I was mirroring or embodying my mother’s maternal actions. This intimate mother-daughter relationship is, according to scholar Adrienne Rich; “at the heart of this female world…central to these relationships is what might be described as an apprenticeship system…mothers and other older women carefully trained daughters in the arts of housewifery and motherhood.”\(^\text{12}\)

In 1983, my mother used the means she gained through woman’s work and obtained a post-secondary education. She no longer needed to adhere to a socially prescribed gender-specific stereotype. Thus, my mother became a role model for a strong independent woman.

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\(^\text{12}\)Adrienne Rich. *Of Women Born.* 233
Scholar Green outlines a lineage of practice where feminist values are passed from one generation to the next as a practice of creating “feminist motherlines.” She establishes the practices of “motherlines” and “feminist mothering” through a series of interviews with a group of scholars that are mothers. In the interviews, she discusses the significance of their feminism, their commitment to feminist practices, and to their understanding of their (re)construction of motherhood. As I reflect on my encounters with the most influential woman in my life and her struggle with mothering in a patriarchal space, I understand the interconnectivity in our motherline and how her struggle has afforded me the opportunity to practice feminist mothering freed from the institution of motherhood.

Motherlines help mothers like myself, “gain authority in various ways through exposure to an embodied knowledge of mothering.” Acknowledging my mother’s history is the context of my thesis exhibition work, wherein the experiences of mothering can be seen as a site to empower other women. I seek to express how feminist mothering can be a source of power, thus “encouraging political changes through personal awareness and action.” I see myself as an empowered woman, mother, and artist. I am expressing personal agency through my art practice and actions of labour to inspire others.

1.3 Methodology

Like my work Abandoned, the sculptures outlined in this following section are not included in my thesis exhibition but were created during my MFA. They are important to the methodology and research that is the foundation of A Way of Knowing, rooted in the skills

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13 Fiona Green Joy. Practising Feminist Mothering. 111
14 Ibid. 111
15 Ibid. 65
handed down to me from my mother. As an introduction to the work, I begin with the methodology of using traditionally female acts of labour, such as cooking.

The first artwork to reflect on the often-oppressive nature of motherhood was called *Forty Hours Are Never Enough* (see fig. 2). It is made up of a used cookbook and a small round sculpture made from cuttings taken from the cookbook. Utilising an object commonly found in a domestic space, I used process and production to expose my time and labour involved in creating an artwork, while investigating traditional woman’s work.

*Forty Hours Are Never Enough* is a meditational re-enactment of domestic activity from my past role as a full-time stay-at-home mother responsible for cooking for my family. In this piece, I thoughtfully read through each line of the recipes in the cookbook, and any direction that represented a performed labour - mixing, chopping, whisking - was meticulously isolated and cut out, sentence by sentence. Following this, I carefully wove the strips into a ball that acted as a record of the forty hours of work that it took me to cook for my family each week. The weaving, the fragile yet beautiful form, and the humble materials can all be seen as a celebration of the trials and tribulations of my domestic life, or more specifically, of the trials and glories of making art as an empowered woman. Author Sue Scott, in the article *Domestic Disturbances*, states “the meaning and responsibilities of home and family are issues that women artists have probed for years with varying degrees of acceptance and resistance.” Similarly, I derive my work from reflections upon lived experiences of the role of mother in a domestic space.

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In *Forty Hours are Never Enough*, I started thinking about where the acceptance and resistance come from to be an empowered mother. My research interest is in the domestic sphere, but I sought to understand the portrayal as both a prison and a sanctuary. What is the value of women’s work when performed by a mother?

In asking such questions, it became clear feminism and the valuing of a woman’s presence and equality in domestic space, informed and motivated my research. In this terrain I sought to challenge female gender roles, and entwine repetitious acts of my labour, to create a form of documentation relating to my empowerment.

My research led me to investigate second wave feminism. According to Imelda Wheleham, author of *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to ‘Post-Feminism*. The term feminism in western feminist history is the chronological narrative of movements and ideologies aimed at equal rights for women. As Wheleham states, “Feminism embodies many theories rather than being a single discrete theory, and rather than being a politically coherent approach to the subordination of women, is a political commitment - or in some of its forms more an ethical commitment – to giving women their true value.”17 What was significant to my understanding of feminism is that my work reflected a commitment to engaging women by making works that express mothering as a site of feminist political activism. I believe that mothering is one of the many ways in which a woman can be empowered. Through this research, I discovered that the values expressed in my work, such as care and equality for others, are not wholly derived from feminist theory, rather, they came from my embodied experience. At this point in my practice, I was exploring the worldviews of feminism without being conscious of my

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feminist identity or feminist theories. Yet, these theories seem present in this work as a result of the values such as the work ethic developed through a feminist motherline instilled in me as a young woman.

According to author Lucy Lippard in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art*, feminist art production emerged in the late 1960s and created opportunities and spaces that previously did not exist for women artists with a goal to create a dialogue through artwork from a woman’s perspective.\(^{18}\) I investigated the artist Martha Rosler, who responded to the idea of women’s work in the domestic space, to better understand the role feminism has in my art practice. Integral to the notion of the value found in women’s work is Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), a black and white video, six minutes and twenty-nine seconds long in duration. In the video, the artist is first seen in a kitchen, holding a blackboard with the title of the video written on it in white chalk, and begins by putting on a kitchen apron.\(^{19}\) According to author Sue Scott in “Domestic Disturbances,” Rosler proceeds to verbally identify kitchen objects in alphabetical order while demonstrating each object’s use. Initially, the artist demonstrates each object’s use through actions associated with the objects. She then shifts to suggest a violent force, such as slamming down the meat tenderizer. Following this, the artist “spells out the last six letters of the alphabet like a cheerleader, gesturing with her arms and body to shape the letters.”\(^{20}\) Scott states that the work presents a statement ironically by the way in which the objects were presented while making the statement that women were not always happy in their assigned roles as housewives.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{19}\)Martha Rosler. *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6E7fP-betM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6E7fP-betM) Accessed August 8, 2018

\(^{20}\)Scott, Sue. "Domestic Disturbances." 118-121

\(^{21}\)Ibid. 120
The scene set by Rosler looks closely at domestic practices from a feminist perspective that holds relevance for my practise, by questioning the relationship between women in a domestic space, and where or how their relationship to empowerment is formed. In my work, *Till I Rest Again* made of seven sewn aprons dipped in clay slip and fired to vitrification, hung in a row from painted gray oval wooden plaques, I also examined repetitive acts of labour, while reflecting on gendered roles, thus exploring the complementary dualities of strength and fragility found in women doing women’s work (see fig. 3). I found the strength to overcome the repetition of domestic work by reflecting on it and commemorating fragility and strength through the vitrified ceramic form, while Rosler’s work conveys empowerment through the ironic mockery of the domestic space.

In my art practice, specific numbers are utilized that relate to days, weeks, months or years. In *Till I Rest Again*, each of the seven aprons represents the work mothers devote seven days of the week to their family. When reflecting on the ritualistic nature of women’s work, I started to ask the questions: Where is a women’s resilience cultivated? How does a woman find empowerment in women’s work? How does her work empower others? The working title *Till I Rest Again* and the significance of the seven aprons reference the biblical passage from Exodus 20:9 “Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work, [but the seventh day you must rest.]”

Despite my mother’s Christian faith and biblical imperative to rest, she rarely took a break on Sunday. It is her resilience and hard work ethics that have informed much of my identity. She liberated herself from a structure that was limiting her life, imparting upon me that women are

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not to be treated differently because of their gender. Her act of strength is a source of my empowerment.

*Forty Hours Are Never Enough* and *Till I Rest Again*, were the start of a journey to express empowerment within the domestic space, and how for a mother, like myself, performing traditional roles can be a source of feminist political activism. The realization of a feminist identity that came from these works, became the source of inspiration for the entirety of the exhibition: *A Way Of Knowing*.

**CHAPTER 2: The Exhibition**

**2.1 Description of the Exhibition**

In *A Way of Knowing*, six large-scale sculptures reference female presence through the use of ruffles, aprons, or dresses. Similarly, three medium-scale works reference feminine presence, but through labour, materials and form. The materials and practices are varied: handcrafted paper; cotton fabric; sewing, honey preserved in jars; handcrafted stoneware objects; silkscreen prints; and cast objects in bronze. Two of the sculptures contain text components, one is made in bronze and the other is comprised of embossed letters.

The exhibiton installation work is arranged within the bottom of the “L” shape of the Schumiacher Sculpture Court, (a long narrow hallway with a wall on one side and a window on the other, with a small winowless space at the end, that can be accessed from either side) by individually hanging the large scale sculptures by the ceiling in a zig-zag formation to encourage the viewer to follow a weaving path from one sculpture to the next. Following this, three medium-scale sculptures are displayed on plinths. Each of the sculptures is laid out in chronological order that references a personal timeline of my life’s history as a woman, wife, and mother.
Both ends of the gallery are accessible and offer a different vantage point to view the exhibition as a whole. The first offers a guided path to or A Way of Knowing, where my strength as a mother and a woman has been established, through my mother's life’s work and feminist practices as an artist. The second presents work that expresses an empowered artist and mother, followed by leading the viewer back through the lens of my history, and concludes with a work of foundational importance, that represents a resilient feminist mother at the roots, or beginning of her future.

In order of presentation in the exhibition space from the far east exit, the six large-scale works are installed and titled as follows: 47Ruffles (see fig. 4), followed by So She Did (see fig. 8), She Could (see fig. 9), Tales of Protection (see fig. 6), Remember Here the Sacrifice (see fig. 5), Nevertheless She Persisted (see fig. 7). Continuing in the gallery space, the three medium-scale works are displayed and titled as follows: A Way of Knowing (see fig. 10), You Reap What You Sow (see fig. 11), The Road Narrows as We Go (see fig. 12).

2.2 The Significance of the Titles

The titles in my exhibition relate to how I navigate feminist mothering in my life and art practice. Specifically, I generated titles for the works that extended the motherline as a connection through a declarative statement of empowerment. To be an artist and a mother is a way of life, and they are interconnected for me.

For example, in “So She Did” the statement asks a question through the ambiguity of the title: “what did she do?” I do not know when or where I first heard or saw the words “She believed she could, so she did,” but I wrote it in my sketchbook. The origins of the statement are
found in R.S. Grey’s book “Scoring Wilder,” and commonly used as a quotable quote.\footnote{R.S. Grey, Scoring Wilder. https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1284408-she-believed-she-could-so-she-did Accessed August 13, 2018} With that, it is not uncommon for my mother to use the phrase, “because she could” when answering a question relating to labour or work. The beginning of the statement, so she did, pulled apart from the full statement, asks a question through a declarative statement, that I have tried to personally answer through my work.

The use of a question in this title examines hidden labour that relates to my internal work in relation to where resilience or inner strength comes from at any age. The title proclaims my thoughts on female gender roles while feminist mothering through my art practice, first by using a title that is an authoritative and powerful statement. From this perspective, a mother of independent adult children still has a very important job to do, such as teaching values of the empowerment of women. This work is ongoing. According to Green, “central to understanding women’s experience of mothering is recognizing that motherhood is not restricted to merely childbearing and/or caring for children.”\footnote{Fiona Joy Green. Practising Feminist Mothering. 67} A woman in or out of the home has power and the right to believe and live any of her dreams she wants to make possible. That idea is reflected in my titles, which express how a woman or mother is present in their child’s lives at any age, by living her best life, as the title of my work declares, “She Could.”

Other titles, such as Tales of Protection reflect on an act to nurture and care while breaking free from the institution of motherhood. Andrea O’Reilly states that “women’s own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power.”\footnote{Andrea O’Reilly. Maternal Theory. “ Feminist Mothering.” 794} The question asked in the title of this work is “What is being protected?” In this case, it is feminist values. It is important to
remember the past, but more important to learn and grow from it, by continuing to inspire others. Similarly, one of the mothers Green interviewed expressed that “feminism is evident in her relationship with her children, particularly her commitment to teaching them how to be aware and critical of various forms of oppression.” Similarly, I used the title to help guide the viewer to think about what I am protecting in this piece.

CHAPTER 3: My Studio Practice

3.1 Feminist Motherline…

While my experience as a mother plays an important role in my artistic endeavours, I reveal my identity as a feminist mother through an authoritative approach to domestic labour. The work conveys presence, and celebrates women, such as myself, and our significance, by demonstrating through labour how values of equality and nurturance express empowerment.

While creating the work included in A Way of Knowing, I reflected on my mother’s feminist practices and the influence her feminism has played on my life, but also on the ideologies in feminism that empower women to live lives with “authority, agency, and autonomy.” These foundational feminist values imparted from one generation to the next can be established without being consciously aware of feminist theory. Green outlines the act of connecting mothers to their female ancestors by “sharing and documenting the knowledge and insights of feminist mothering practices,” as an act that creates a feminist motherline.

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26 Fiona Joy Green. Practising Feminist Mothering. 84
27 Ibid. 115
My exhibition work is deliberately engaging in expressing the significance of feminist mothering by connecting to an audience in a committed and conscious way. Similarly, to one of the mothers that Green interviewed, feminist mothers purposefully are:

sharing and documenting the knowledge and insights of feminist mothering practices; in part to ensure the practices and strategy of feminist mothering remain visible to mothers and their children, and in part to help assure that the difficult and rewarding work of feminist mothering continues to be recognised and recorded as an open and communal feminist strategy for social change.28 (“Practising Feminist Mothering,” 12.)

By using sewing to express joining, fullness, and pride, while referencing a practice that was used by women, such as my mother throughout history, I understand and relate to the act of making by hand as a demonstration of strength. With this in mind, the use of sewing and thread in the sculptures are a source of authorization to honour mothers who use domestic labour to create, make, and mend children’s clothing. Green states that one of the cornerstones of feminist practices is “understanding how the personal is political, recognizing and demanding autonomy and choice for all, and putting one’s feminist understanding and theorizing into everyday practice.”29 As such, after acknowledging my mother’s history, I am going beyond the critiques of motherhood from within patriarchy to investigate maternal practices as sites for women’s empowerment in my exhibition work, A Way of Knowing.

3.2 Materials and Form…

The first work presented in the exhibition, A Way of Knowing, is 47 Ruffles, is a soft sewn sculpture of a little girl’s dress containing forty-seven rows of ruffles (see fig. 4). The sculpture’s finished height is approximately eighteen feet in length, hanging by sewn armature.

Similar to all the large scale works in my exhibition, the sculpture conceptually conveys the idea

28 Ibid. 112
29 Fiona Joy Green. Practicing Feminist Mothering. 56
of a feminine presence through its large scale, representing the beauty and strength of women in the context of domestic space, while being made from the domestic practice of sewing. This work is intended to reclaim a part of my mother’s history by exposing the institution of motherhood and references feminist mothering as a political act to honour her resilience.

I made the sculpture by sewing a small pale-yellow girl’s dress out of recycled fabric. Next, I added a single layer of blue ruffles, each approximately eight inches in width, on the hem of the dress, until I reached forty-seven layers. I sewed each layer from recycled fabric from thrift store shirts. 47 Ruffles references a significant attribute of my mother’s, which was to make the best out of what she had. As an act of resilience and strength, when my handmade dress became too short, my mother sewed on a new ruffle from scraps of material. My motive in this work is to honour, salvage, and preserve the legacy of my mother, by creating an index that represents forty-seven years of my life.

Although my art is rooted in handmaking practices such as sewing and ceramics, that according to author Julia Bryan-Wilson have “traditionally been gendered female,”30 other material elements, such as bronze, are juxtaposed in the work. By using bronze, a material associated with power and the male-dominated art-historical canon, my work is participating in a practice established in the 1970s during the feminist art movement, that confronts hierarchy. According to author Lucy R. Lippard in From The Center female artists during this period set the foundations to challenge stereotypes, such as women’s work associated with the female gender, and also the gendering of material.31 I exert my authority as a woman and artist to use traditional feminine practices and traditional male practices to present a sense of equality in the works. One

31 Lucy R. Lippard. From The Center. 1-11.
cannot deny the association bronze has with strength and power, and therefore the use of bronze is meant to emphasize the commemoration of empowerment in domestic space, which is created through a feminist motherline that continues to be “recognized and recorded as an open and communal feminist strategy for social change.”

Furthering the connection to my mother’s feminist motherline, I situate my work in the context of craft. According to artist and author Bruce Metcalf, craft has a distinct history which emphasizes creating by hand. In my opinion, making work by hand is an expression of human values that imparts the intimacy of human touch that has the ability to nurture, share, connect, and ultimately, empower one another through acts of labour. For example, according to Edward Lucie-Smith “craft could be used to mean strength [and] power,” and within this context, the sewn sculpture *47 Ruffles* constructs a parallel history to my mother’s history. By contextualizing my work within a craft context, I create a link to my mother’s traditions and situate myself as an artist using traditional craft techniques as social and political activism.

In the sewn sculptures, I impart value for practices, histories, and social placement that are undervalued, by using traditional craft techniques commonly found in domestic space, such as sewing or repairing a ruffle on a skirt. By using my life experiences as a mother and my relationship with my mother to build context for the sculptures, I am creating a thread that weaves the past into the present. I am proposing this sculpture as an index of my history, but I see my work as a part of the larger history of women and feminist art.

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CHAPTER 4: I am…

4.1 Feminist Mothering Through Textiles Metaphors

My commitment to illustrating feminist values is expressed throughout the exhibition with the use of red thread, fabric, and labour from the work of my hands. Specifically, in the work *Remember Here The Sacrifice*, the use of red thread is highlighted (see fig. 5). The sewn, soft sculpture is made of seven rows of eight-inch sewn letters that spell the word SHE, which is repeated one hundred and eighty-two times. Each letter has been cut out by hand and contains a thick embossed outline in red thread, over a rose or brown coloured fabric. The colour choice of the scarlet red thread is used symbolically to represent love or pride and connection. Embroidery thread that is traditionally used to embellish a sewn object, and in this work, the thread metaphorically represents the stitches that a woman or mother chooses to “sow” in her daily life, or the connections she makes through her life’s work or her motherline. Beverly Gordon states in the book *Textiles: The Whole Story Uses Meaning Significance*,

The central story we are all involved with, of course, is the story of our human lives. “The threads of time” is an expression that links textile strands and the linear, mortal path. We talk about life “hanging by a thread,” which similarly reminds us of our fragility and the preciousness of our time on Earth. (we were literally connected to our mother through a cord, which had to be cut for us to enter this world and breathe on our own.)

I see a direct connection to feminism through the “threads of time” metaphor, as textiles often are associated with fate. “The very word “cloth” possibly has roots in the name of Clotho, the goddess of Greek mythology who controlled human life. Clotho was technically the spinner, who spun human life.” As a mother and artist, I too see myself as the spinner imparting life through

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feminist values by way of nurturance and the care taken in creating my handcrafted and textile-based work. For example, in *Remember Here The Sacrifice*, I chose to spend forty hours hand plucking the loose threads on the warp and weft of the sewn letters on five of the seven rows. Further to this, the rows are carefully coiled up forming oval shape formations at the middle and top of the structure. Leaving two rows of letters with frayed edges and threads left untouched, represents two women’s connection through labour. Gordon suggests that threads symbolize strength and connection and serve to figuratively and literally tie things or people together and that intertwined filaments are strong and durable.

*Tales of Protection*, references a small canning room in a domestic space in size and scale, with an interior approximately nine square feet, made out of pine, painted with white house paint (see fig. 6). The doorway of the room, cloaked with a curtain made from cheesecloth and hemmed by hand with red thread, contains an interior room lined with shelves of three hundred and sixty-five spools of red thread, preserved in jars of honey. It has an interior space accessible for the viewer to stand in to create an experiential sense of embodiment, through the idea of connection to the metaphorical maternal figure. The sculpture’s exterior, sewn in a soft gold striped fabric references a ruffle or skirt on a dress.

In this work, labour and craft reference domestic space as a site for contemplation and agency. The act of canning or preserving a red thread represents a connection to my mother and daughter. The honey used to preserve or protect the thread symbolizes life and fertility. As a mother, I consciously protected my daughter from future domestic oppression by making sure she had access to post-secondary education and teaching her craft skills, which is a form of

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37Ibid23
feminist mothering. The act of parenting in this way is a political act, similar to that of one of the mothers Green interviewed, “in the sense that you have so much impact on your children regarding who they become and how they are in the world.” Additionally, the title *Tales of Protection* suggests control of the feminist mothering acts.

*Tales of Protection* represents a motherline between my daughter and myself, but also represents the connection between all mothers and daughters, metaphorically and biologically. I am standing on the shoulders of women in history; artistically the feminist artists who came before me are the mothers of my artwork. The feminist artists who inspired the work in my exhibition through their actions, materials, and forms, are a source of my artistic empowerment and are the mothers of my feminist identity.

### 4.2 Artistic Influences…

*Aganetha Dyck’s The Extended Wedding Party (1995)* and *Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party (1974-1979)*, informed my work through their feminism and use of materials. Curator Shirley Madill, in the publication *Aganetha Dyck*, states that the artist, over the course of fifteen years, produced an expansive body of work that “brings to form the very meaning of our daily existence.” This idea has informed my practice through a conviction to feminist mothering, visible through labour, to inspire other woman.

According to the Winnipeg Art Gallery website, Dyck’s work, titled *Glass Bride’s Dress*, is made from a glass wedding dress torso in a plexiglass case covered with beeswax comb, the result from a collaboration with honeybees. Further, it is stated that, Dyck’s work explores the

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idea of the bride and the institution of marriage and the queen bee and the communal activity of
the hive; the work calls into question “the feminine and masculine roles prescribed in rituals such
as marriage.” 40 Initially, I became interested in Dyck’s work because of my personal practice of
working with honey bees to obtain honey, but my art and exhibition work, relate to the queen
and all the female workers inside the hive labouring to give a better chance at life to others.
Female worker bees who learn from the generation before them provide a record of their labour
in honey and this is an apt metaphor that represents the motherline resulting from witnessing an
empowered female at work.

Nevertheless She Persisted, a sewn sculpture in a round form is made of seven aprons and
pouches in a striped fabric, with each pouch containing a set of two-inch bronze letters that spell,
“she” (see fig. 7). The concept for the piece, references my early work made of seven aprons, Till
I Rest Again, addressing what it means to be both an artist and a mother. This piece demonstrates
my belief that an embodied knowledge of mothering can be used to empower other women, and
in a domestic space a woman is not restricted by her situation. Green states that practicing
feminist mothering in part is a strategy of making feminist mothers “aware of the influences they
have in the lives of their children.”41 Through the commemorative material of bronze the
pronoun “she” in this work makes visible a feminist motherline that conveys the idea of strength
through connection and actions. This work is an expression of a mother’s resilience and hard
work ethic made visible through the sculpture’s form. The structure, materials, and use of text

May 28, 2018
41Fiona Joy Green. Practicing Feminist Mothering.100
show a form of liberation from the institution of motherhood, they do not conform to the archetype of a dependent housewife, and this is a source of strength in my life and work.

Author Joan Borsa in the catalogue essay, “The Absent Bride Intimate Acts & Interior Movements,” describes Dyck’s installation and the labour involved in making it as an intimate exchange between the artist and nature, making the collaboration process visible. 42 I relate to how the dress, with no head or limbs, creates the sense of a female presence that has gone missing. However, the dress is encrusted with beeswax through bee’s labour making female labour visible. How Dyck’s work has informed mine, is through the practice of making my labour visible, but the collaboration is figuratively between my mother and myself, through feminist practices that have informed the work.

According to Shirley Madill The Extended Wedding Party “provides a comment on society’s views of the institution of marriage and the rituals that surround it,” 43 by referencing women’s works in the domestic sphere that lead to being limited by her role as a mother. However, in the year 2018 women such as myself are afforded agency to be living as mothers, fulfilled, and supported by feminist motherliness. Nevertheless, She Persisted, expresses autotomy through the text and materials, by highlighting feminist values that a woman or mother is visible and strong in domestic space. The feminist values that inspired my art and life are foundations that have been built by women and artists for generations before me.

As such, the artist and author Judy Chicago, is a classically trained fine artist who created one of the most well-known pieces of feminist art in existence titled, The Dinner Party which is

housed permanently in the Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. According to Chicago, in her book titled *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of our Heritage*, the piece was created over a period of five years from 1974-1979. The monumental sculpture is a symbolic history of women’s notable achievements and struggles told through thirty-nine china painted plates, gold ceramic chalices, and elaborately embroidered runners which cover a triangular banquet table. Under the table are the names of 999 women of varied nationalities and experiences in western history, who had not been acknowledged for their significant contribution to society, did something to improve the conditions for women, or illuminated or provided an aspect of women’s experience that could potentially be a model for the future. The women’s names were painted on ceramic tiles, and the dinnerware settings contain painted, and sculpted butterfly and vulva inspired designs representing Mother Nature and the life-giving properties of the feminine form.

Specifically, I relate to and am inspired by how Chicago used traditional craft practices such as embroidery and ceramics as an expression of feminist principles to reclaim a part of women’s history. As such, throughout my exhibition work I use such practices to reclaim and celebrate the lineage to my history, as an empowered mother and artist. In Chicago’s work, traditional craft is celebrated as a feminine art practice: “in the combination of intricately wrought textiles, tile, and porcelain, Chicago reclaimed the realm of ‘high art’ to include what had traditionally been relegated to the lower statues of ‘women’s work.’” Additionally, through the artist rediscovering lost role models for women, she brought the past to the public

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44The Art Story Modern Art Insight. [www.theartstory.org/movement-feminist-art](http://www.theartstory.org/movement-feminist-art), Web Accessed June 10, 2018
46The Art Story Modern Art Insight. [www.theartstory.org/movement-feminist-art](http://www.theartstory.org/movement-feminist-art), Accessed June 10, 2018
consciousness by resurfacing these women, extending the motherline from history to the present, for artists like myself to be educated and inspired by.

In Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, she states that she used plates because of their association with eating to convey the fact that the women she represented in the work “had been swallowed up and obscured by history, instead of being recognized and honoured.” 47Similarly, in *So She Did*, I am honoring my mother by revisiting women’s work, but while conveying how equality can be found in domestic space (see fig. 8). The sewn sculpture is ninety-six inches in height and made of thirty-one silkscreen prints on fabric of a set of child’s hands placed on a table setting. Seven gold lustered cast porcelain ceramic hammers hang in a vertical strip from the sculpture. The work in its entirety expresses a part of my identity that prides itself on the work that I do about the traces I leave behind. This piece expresses the notion of equality through domestic labour, as both traditionally women’s and men’s work come together to create a cohesive whole. Also present are the childrens’ hands, which acknowledge that children also play a role in the domestic family unit.

Just as my motherline taught me feminist values, as a mother, it is important to role model for my daughter and son an attitude of giving and caring for others while maintaining equality in domestic space. In Chicago’s writing, she explains that through her research she realized that “women’s achievements had been left out of history and the records of their lives had apparently disappeared.” 48Similarly, it is just as relevant and important to continue to honour all women, even those whose achievements are relegated to the domestic sphere.

47Judy Chicago. *The Dinner Party a symbol of our heritage*. 9
48Ibid.11
Caring for others, equality, and empowerment: these values are emphasized through acts of labour when sewing, silk screen printing, or making porcelain objects, and through references to the physical and metaphorical body. In Chicago’s work, the artist used china-painting, “as a perfect metaphor for women’s domesticated and trivialized circumstances”49 to reclaim a part of women’s history that had been left out. So She Did contains a framing hammer to reference the building of a home and the building of a motherline in my feminist history. In my childhood, a hammer was a tool that was used by my father, but today, it is commonly used by female artists including myself in our art practice.

I cast the hammers in porcelain to reference a domestic dish made from the same material, such as my mother’s bone china dishes, which are used with family during times of celebration, contemplation, or grief. These objects, like our bodies, wear out from daily use. They are not immortal or transcendent and thus remind us of our mortality. Our time is precious on earth, and to honour this, the hammer is covered in gold lustre to commemorate the object as a gender-neutral tool and to signify its importance. Symbolically, the fragility of the tool is a reminder to practice what my mother taught me; to do your best with the time you have. In this case, the work is showcasing equality.

*She Could*, is made up of sixty-two ceramic hammers individually hung from a sewn sculpture that references a skirt and the idea of a feminine tool belt (see fig. 9). The labour to complete the sculpture, like domestic labour, was ritualistic and intense. There is always a moment, within the act of repetitious work, when the decision to take on such a task comes into question; the act of defining myself as an artist serves as a challenge to my body’s capabilities as

49 Ibid.11
a maker. Through this relationship with my work, I have become deeply intimate with the term labour. I believe the record of my actions speaks to a part of my identity that understands the value of commitment and hard work, be it physical or mental; a value certainly instilled in me from an early age.

4.3 Feminist History is My History …

Reflecting on my feminist art practice led me to analyze or validate my role as an artist and mother. According to author Imelda Whelehan in her book *Modern Feminist Thought*, it is logical for feminists to devote much attention to the structure of the family and attempt to uncover the real conditions of ordinary women’s lives. She suggests that; “all feminist positions are founded upon the belief that women suffer from systematic social injustices because of their sex and therefore, any feminist is, at the very minimum, commitment to some form of reappraisal of the position of women in society.”

I see a form of reappraisal in my position as a woman artist, a responsibility to pose questions relating to societal expectations of being both a working woman and a mother of adult children.

As I acknowledge my artistic role working within feminism, and as I identify my role in my practice as that of a labourer, it is necessary to contextualize my process within the social structure of young adulthood. In the anthology, *History in Canada: New Essays on Women, Gender, Work and Nation*, edited by Catherine Charron and Nancy Janovicek, what I found most interesting is the social and economic developments that took place throughout Canada, from the early nineteenth century to the latter decade of the twentieth that provided a “nuanced portrait of

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the ways social forces shape individuals.”

I relate this to my lived experience as a mother with my relationship to labour in my artistic endeavours; while we are all part of larger societal discourses, we are also unique individuals with particular stories to tell.

Specifically, I identify with the women interviewed by Catherine Charron in the article *To help and Serve: Women’s Career Paths in the Domestic Services Sector in Quebec City, 1960-2009.* Charron examined how paid domestic labour became part of the career and life trajectories of a sample group of women after the integration of the Women’s Job Market in the 1970s, the so-called Fordist model of labour regulations. In 1976, “the employment rate among partnered mothers of preschool-age children was 26.3 percent; by 2008, that number had risen to 73.4 percent. Men in the same situation, on the other hand, held jobs at a rate of 88.7 percent in 2008.” Further to this, Charron explained how this led to women, in particular, confined to the most feminized occupational sectors. With less education, they tended to have less access, in general, to salaried work.

In 1991, I took my first pottery class, with encouragement from my husband, and found a source of independence, income, and fulfillment, outside of the sphere of a feminized occupational sector. It is through this work that is highly laborious that I discovered not only could I find pleasure in work, but I could also give pleasure to others through this work, while role modeling to my children my presence in the world.

*A Way Of Knowing*, is compiled from seven stacks of seven handcrafted porcelain cups with a silkscreen print of myself in a celebratory gesture on the front of the stack of cups, with a

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52 Ibid. 257-274
53 Ibid. 261
height of twenty one inches (see fig. 10). When the cups are stacked one on top of the other, the figure is visually whole, but when the cups are in use, each cup contains a part of the figures’ form.

Visually, this series of seven stacked cups is packed full of symbolism that references a celebration of the everyday domestic, traditionally feminine experiences and my existence as a mother and maker. The gesture of the figure suggests strength and pride while the figure raises her arms high above her head and over the layers in the stacked forms. The number of cups represents seven days of the week. The idea that a form such as a cup is more than the sum of its parts furthers the idea of time and suggests finding more strength in the layers of everyday existence, through feminist mothering.

The question asked and answered in this work deals with how an object becomes a conduit for connection to another. How can a handcrafted cup capture something felt and not seen, such as a woman’s presence through actions, materials, or forms?

The answer is in You Reap What You Sow, and the practice of feminist mothering that deliberately engages my feminism in a practice of everyday life (see fig. 11). The piece involved giving a second set of forty-nine cups away to strangers, friends and family, accompanied with a handwritten letter. In exchange, the recipient was asked to write a note in return on the six-inch square handcrafted paper provided. This work breaks the stereotype that a woman's role does not cease when her children move out. Gender and age do not define womanhood and I continue to contribute to society through my life’s work and art practice. Feminist mothering is an aspect of every action I take; it is not just about children, it is a communal strategy for social change. The first note I wrote accompanying one of my handcrafted cups was as follows:
Wednesday, February 21, 2018. 9:50 am

Dear Mother,

I hope this note finds you well. When holding this cup filled with liquid let it warm your hands, and feel the essence of presence in your life and recognize you are not alone.

In return, I ask that you take a minute to write down the date, time, and a few words on the back of the embossed paper.

Please mail the note you write back to me.

Keep the cup as a record of our connection.

Much Love, Brenda. Xo.

Furthermore, displayed on a round sewn form made from fabric remnants, the notes returned to me on the embossed paper are further connected through sewing them together with small strips of fabric, to form You Reap What You Sow. The exchange of cups and notes is an exchange of my labour for that of others. It is also an acknowledgment of a moment in their lives and their presence or connection to mine. My cups will nourish them, but their handwritten words in return nourish me. My motherline connects to female ancestors and female predecessors. It connects me to the people I have met, who I have nurtured and who have nurtured me. The sewn round form symbolizes the building of a connection through commemorating labour, while the sewn strips strengthens and pulls the stack of notes together at the binding. The act of binding the bundles obscures the visibility of the words, while making the exchange visible through the record of the paper note left behind.

The final work, The Road Narrows As We Go, made by placing two, five inch round, bronze cast impressions of two handprints formed together as one, is placed on a twenty one inch high stack of eight inch round sewed forms (see fig.12). The fabric used in the sewn form is the remnants from all the sewn sculptures in the exhibiton.
Initially, the impressions were made by placing a small warm ball of beeswax between the grasped hands of my mother and daughter on two separate occasions and casting the resulting forms in bronze. Similarly, in the artist Gabriel Orozco’s work “My Hands Are My Heart,” he used a handful of clay and formed it between his two hands to create a heart shape containing his fingerprints. In Orozco’s work he “speaks of the humble act of love,” which is a fitting parallel to the impressions. However, in my work, through the process of bronze casting, a new material replaced the old as a way to commemorate the interaction, while the form created documents connection, and is further celebrated as permanent and strong. The intimate interaction from the impression left in the soft wax represents my motherline and expresses the impressions we make upon each other. Additionally, the laborious, repetitious act of cutting circles of remnant fabric to support impressions are a reminder of everyday domestic life, from where foundations that have informed my identity have come. Through the act of labour, I am reminded to never forget its existence and impact on my life, while my representation in the form of The Road Narrows As We Go is symbolic of the foundation of my life and connection to my mother.

CONCLUSION

A Way of Knowing is about a motherline and mothering. It embodies the connection between generations, and how the act of one mother resonates throughout history. My mother is central. I have included her history to force myself to remember the inequality affixed to the institution of motherhood; it reminds me not only how far I have come but how far I have to go. Whenever I need strength in my life, speaking my mother’s name reminds me that I am never alone; it reminds me of what she came through for me to gain empowerment in my life.

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54 Nicole Davis, “My Hands Are My Heart,” Gabriel Orozco. www.redflag.org. web accessed August 7, 2018
It is a joy honouring a connection to a woman’s presence through acts of labour, to celebrate the practice of feminist mothering throughout my thesis exhibition. This work became possible because of my mother’s hopes and dreams, by role modeling how fulfillment is achieved through empowering herself. In the words of Adrian Rich, “the quality of a mother’s life…is her primary bequests to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist.”

My thesis exhibition is my documentation that empowerment exists through feminist mothering to act as a guide that links my mother’s history, through me, to my daughters, but also is symbolic for the presence we impart on each other in our daily lives.

Through the process of making of A Way of Knowing, I use the work of my hands to further offer an intimate female connection by making my labour visible in physical forms. For that purpose, I utilize craft materials, such as porcelain, fabric, paper and thread, to built, repair, or connect two things, and this allows me to step into my history, by being committed to a feminist practice that nurtures and empowers others.

55 Adrienne Rich. Of Women Born. 246-7
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