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Bumps, births and breasts : Maternity in late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century fiction

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Bumps, Births and Breasts:

Maternity in Late-Twentieth and Early Twenty-First-Century Fiction

Submitted by

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Statement of Authorship and Sources

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

Statement of Appreciation

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Statement of Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother

Roseine Samaan Ghattas (1920-1994)

Abstract

Bumps, Births and Breasts: Maternity in Late Twentieth- and Early Twenty-First-Century Fiction is a critical examination of a selection of novels and one short story that focus on pregnancy and the postpartum period, childbirth and breastfeeding. Themes of loss, sexual freedom, death, homebirth, threat, containment and salvation are discussed in relation to the way maternity is represented.

Using the key categories of dominant, residual and emergent from social theorist Raymond Williams, who describes cultural elements that may work as counter-hegemonies to dominant cultural practices, in conjunction with feminist and matricentric theory, the thesis identifies some of the origins of late twentieth-century representations of the maternal body and the relationship these representations have to twenty-first-century literature.

The fifteen texts discussed in this thesis were published between 1976-2001. These works are written by North American, British and Irish authors Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Emma Donoghue, Maggie O'Farrell, Lori Lansens, Ami McKay, Lissa M. Cowan and Patricia Ferguson, alongside Australian authors Helen Hodgman, Tim Winton, Peter Carey, Nikki Gemmell, Fiona Higgins and Christos Tsiolkas.

The thesis argues that literature on the maternal published in the twenty-first century maintains a strong reliance on historical understandings of ideal motherhood as well as being deeply influenced by second-wave feminist perspectives that viewed maternity as the loss of self. Despite this fiction being indebted to residual, that is, new appropriations of remnants of the past and dominant images of the role of the wife which are currently in cultural use, the emotions of the new mother and the relationship between mothers and their community, some writers have used literature to re-present the maternal body and the figure of the first-time mother in ways that critique hegemonic understandings of motherhood. The emergent

qualities of these texts are identified, categorised and discussed to establish a critical vocabulary with which to expand the study of literature on the maternal.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Preface

In 2009 I gave birth to the first of my three children. I was in my late twenties and had been a student of literature and a teacher of high school English. Across an Honours degree and research Masters I could only recall one character who had given birth in any fictional narrative. It was Daina, a young woman who discovers her partner Mathew's infidelity while she is in hospital to deliver their child. After a particularly emotional encounter with Daina where Mathew tries to explain that he is, in fact, already married with a child, he sees the blood leaching through her hospital gown. Daina gives him a curt retort: "Blood. I'm not surprised. It's a bloody business." (Brown 56) This scene is from the 1993 script of *Nga Wahine (The Women)*, a short drama, set entirely in a maternity hospital, by New Zealand playwright and screenwriter Riwia Brown. The script formed the basis of one of the chapters in my Masters thesis on postcolonial drama. The narrative explored the messiness of intimate relationships, influenced by racial tensions and class differences in urban New Zealand. The maternal blood was symbolic of the disorder and hurt experienced by the mother characters. It was the only instance of maternity in fiction that I could remember with certainty from my years studying literature.

My first experience of motherhood was extremely challenging, and I returned to my love of reading as a way to sustain me during the endless hours of difficult breastfeeding in the first few months. I came across Alison Bartlett's 2005 text *Breastwork: Rethinking Breastfeeding* with the realisation that it had given me some answers about the representation of breastfeeding in contemporary Australian society, but key questions remained for me: where were breastfeeding mothers in literature? Were they even represented in literature?

And if I could find them, could I also find pregnant women and women in childbirth? My original thesis proposal was naively simple in its intent: to go about finding examples of maternity in novels, examples substantial enough to warrant literary investigation and analysis. I was hoping to find enough examples to argue that mothers and their embodied experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding were not silent or missing in literature. Those texts would give a voice to mothers in literature, I reasoned. I wanted to demonstrate to other young mothers such as myself that we could see ourselves and our experiences reflected in fiction: fiction that I hoped would confirm our bodily experiences, however varied, or give language to what was at times an indescribable physical and emotional journey.

What I discovered was a complex interplay between literature and culture that gave life to these young mother characters. I had indeed found maternity in fiction beyond *Nga Wahine,* and these mothers were being drawn from a complex web of history, feminist discourse and creativity. It is my aim that this thesis expands upon the scholarly interrogation of what mothers mean to our culture and to ourselves.

The research undertaken in the writing of this thesis has led me to believe that there are two key aspects missing in current literary analysis of mothers. The first is the significant gaps that remain in current scholarship of the representation of the maternal and the embodied work of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. These gaps are due to a lack of consistent scholarship in the area, and that this scholarship has remained author-specific or nation-specific. My thesis aims to diminish these gaps by using the theoretical frame of dominant, residual and emergent cultural formations, drawn from the work of Raymond Williams (*Marxism and Literature*) to identify some of the origins of late twentieth-century representations of maternity and the relationship these representations have with twenty-first-century literature. The second key aspect that is missing within current scholarship and which

my thesis addresses is a consideration of the future of a literature on the maternal. It is my identification and rationale of emergent qualities in these narratives representing the maternal that contributes to this understanding. After undertaking such scholarship, I have concluded that literature on the maternal in the twenty-first century maintains a strong reliance on historical images of ideal motherhood. Despite this fiction being indebted to images of the past, some writers have found creative ways to re-present the maternal body and the figure of the first-time mother. It is these qualities that I deem emergent. While there were not enough emergent qualities present in the fiction examined in this thesis to conclude literature on the maternal as having moved to an emergent stage, I argue that this early part of the twenty-first century sees the beginning of a "pre-emergent stage" (Milner, "Williams, Raymond"), where the representation of the maternal will begin to undergo significant change and critique within its fictional form. My research highlights this time of transition, and it points to both past traditions and future trends on the representation of the maternal in literature.

Outline and Aims

Bumps, Births and Breasts: Maternity in Late Twentieth- and Early Twenty-First-Century Fiction is a critical examination of a selection of published novels and one short story in English that have a focus on pregnancy and the postpartum period, childbirth, or breastfeeding, or a combination of these three aspects.

The texts were chosen based on the strength of the themes of maternity present in the narrative and focuses on how the maternal body is perceived by other characters in the plot. This selection of fiction comes from a wide variety of established and newer authors from Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. The analysis of these texts is divided into three main chapters that each focus on a key aspect of embodied maternity. Chapter 2: Motherhood as Loss discusses the representation in fiction of the pregnant woman,

as well as the early months of motherhood, using five novels; Chapter 3: Captive Labour gives an analysis of childbirth based on its representation in one short story and seven novels; and Chapter 4: Milk and Salvation focuses on the representation of breastfeeding in four of the novels. Some texts are discussed across more than one chapter in order to facilitate a substantial analysis of the ways in which maternity is presented in these novels. Of the fifteen texts examined in this research, five were published between 1976-1991 and ten between 2000-2015.

The form of the novel offers ways to explore detailed fictional narratives about the lives of mothers. Historically, one source from which the novel emerged was conduct books aimed at women in the mid-eighteenth century, and it was a form of writing that drew women as both authors and protagonists from its earliest form (Armstrong 104). Throughout the development of the novel in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, narratives have often engaged with the interior and domestic lives of women and in women's social conduct and relationships with men (Armstrong 104-106). As works of fiction, novels reflect the time in which they are written and often expose the social constraints under which people live, dependent upon their gender and class. Nancy Armstrong argues that the development of the English novel into a "polite" form of education and leisure for women helped to dramatise the appropriate behaviour of young women already present in the conduct books of the mid-eighteenth century (104-05). Implicit in the development of the novel is the concept of the "desirable woman" (105) and the links between femininity, wifehood and maternity. Barbara Welter refers to the sheer volume of conduct material published for women readers well into the mid-nineteenth century in the United States, describing it as exalting the "attributes of True Womanhood" which "could be divided into four cardinal virtues-piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 152). These attributes of femininity soon became the staple representation of the ideal woman in the novels of domestic fiction published in the

English language across Western Europe and the United States. The novel and its evolution in the representation of womanhood and motherhood offers rich potential for scholarship into current fictional representation of such experiences. It provides opportunity to examine and theorise the effect of historical understandings of womanhood and motherhood on twenty-first-century literature.

The texts I ultimately selected placed an emphasis on the physical and emotional workings of the maternal body, where the mother and the bodily work of the mother came into conflict with other characters or caused a substantial reaction in other characters depicted in the narrative. It was in this conflict around the maternal body that my literary analysis would reveal the common concerns and manifestations around maternity in the time period on which I was focusing. The maternal body is the physical body of the mother and the site of numerous physical changes that occur throughout the periods of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. Apart from being a physical space, the maternal body is a contested site of ideas about ideal motherhood. The relationship between the physical maternal body and motherhood in the fiction analysed in this thesis show a concern with limiting the "unruly" (O'Brien Hallstein 'Bikini' 121) maternal body and the boundaries of appropriate feminine behaviour that others place on the character of the mother.

For some authors in my selection, particularly Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison, there is a vast amount of scholarly material about their work, though not all this material is focused on the maternal aspects of their fiction. The fiction of Atwood and Morrison, selected for examination in this thesis, contributes to an understanding of well-known mother characters and the texts that form what may be termed a literature of the maternal. In selecting newer texts by lesser-known authors, I seek to contribute new scholarship about novels exploring motherhood that have not been examined in such depth. Moreover, Australian fiction featuring maternity had not been examined by maternal scholars of

literature, thus I sought to find Australian texts to balance the discussions about literature from North America and the United Kingdom. This process of refining and balancing work which had already been thoroughly discussed from the mid-twentieth century led to my focus on works from the late 1970s to the present day. I was interested to see which trends or tropes were being established and how the turn of the twenty-first century may or may not have brought about a change in that representation. Therefore, this thesis does not examine the works of earlier twentieth-century novelists who wrote about maternal themes, such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Doris Lessing's *A Proper Marriage* and *The Fifth Child* and Enid Bagnold's *The Squire*. In addition, there are a number of novels which make reference to childbirth in the early to mid-twentieth century, some of which have been analysed by Carol H. Poston, whose research forms the framework for my chapter on childbirth.

To facilitate the depth of discussion and analysis that I wanted to contribute to the field of literary studies on the maternal, the final selection of texts for each chapter centred around common themes. The fiction echoed ideas around new motherhood as a divergence between the needs of the mother and infant and the expectations of the wider society in which these characters lived. Loss, threat, containment, sexuality and death were seen repeatedly among works that explored all three embodied aspects of maternity, while salvation was a theme that reoccurred in novels centred around breastfeeding and warranted further scholarship.

In refining the list of fiction down to fifteen, some texts from this time period fell outside these larger, overarching themes. While meriting scholarly inquiry into the representation of the maternal in those texts, this was outside the scope of the thesis which required common themes for a discussion on the relationship between literature and culture to develop. Two such novels published in the 1990s were Julie Myerson's *Sleepwalking* (1994)

and Sapphire's *Push* (1996). While these texts deal substantially with pregnancy and childbirth and do include birth scenes, the focus of both novels is on the physical and emotional abuse suffered by the new mothers at the hands of their fathers during their childhood. The women in *Sleepwalking* and *Push* transition to motherhood with unresolved conflict as daughters, which forms the core of their maternal identity. This made them outliers among the list of fiction considered for examination. Numerous other texts were considered but ultimately discounted such as Anne Enright's 1995 novel *The Wig My Father Wore* and the short story "In the Bed Department" from her 2008 collection *Taking Pictures* contained references to pregnancy that I deemed too brief to form a substantial analysis. Alice Munro's short story "My Mother's Dream" from *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998) tells of Jill's early experience of motherhood from the point of view of her adult daughter and was therefore not included in the chapter on pregnancy and the postpartum period due to its emphasis on the daughter's point of view. Australian novelist Rod Jones and his 2015 novel *The Mothers* placed an emphasis on historical understandings of single motherhood in suburban Melbourne. Like Myerson and Sapphire's novels on child abuse, Jones' single mother was an outlier among the numerous narratives which explored the maternal experience alongside that of wifehood. Echoing the dystopian future in *The Handmaid's Tale* where pregnancy is rare and under state surveillance is Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), and while the topic of surveillance and maternity raises interesting scholarly questions, the overall themes and setting were quite different from the domesticity and suburbia of the other narratives in the pregnancy chapter.

For the thesis to develop a rigorous method of analysis and make a substantial contribution, the number of texts were limited to enable detailed analysis to occur. Refining the list of fiction had led to a gap of a decade within the time period that this thesis focuses on. While three of the texts mentioned previously that did not make it into the final selection

were published in the 1990s, I found little else in that decade and far more in the decade before and after. In fact, twenty-first-century fiction on the maternal has been more prolific than previous decades and here I speculate why this might be.

The height of influence from second-wave feminist thought was in works published in the late 1960s through to the late 1970s. Within this period, scholar Ann Snitow found two distinct stages. The first stage of 1963-1974 begins with Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* and includes Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970); these works are what Snitow calls the "demon texts" (35) for the way in which they were often misquoted and attacked for their anti-family ideas and for encouraging the separation of mothers from their children. The period 1975-1979, however, is when the relationship between motherhood and feminist goals was critiqued with more emphasis and nuance among key texts. The year 1976 alone saw the publication of numerous texts on the consideration of motherhood in feminist ideas, among them Hélène Cixous' essay on women's writing "The Laugh of the Medusa", Adrienne Rich's theoretical and personal reflection *Of Woman Born* and Jane Lazarre's memoir *The Mother Knot*. A key theme to emerge from this proliferation of work was the notion of maternal ambivalence, defined by Rozsika Parker as a state "in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side" ("Maternal Ambivalence" 17). Adrienne Rich wrote about ambivalence from both a personal and a theoretical perspective in *Of Woman Born*, which created interest in developing the field of maternal studies. It was perhaps in response to at least a decade of feminist discussion and publishing around maternal ambivalence that novelists incorporated this nuance into their fictional explorations of motherhood. This trend could explain the prevalence of fiction emerging from the same nations as the theoretical work, both dominated by British and North American writers. Concurrent with the theoretical texts produced in the late 1970s, there is a development in fiction contending with ideas about motherhood that reaches a high point in the mid-1980s,

with novels such as Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Morrison's *Beloved.* These novels not only helped to solidify the writing careers of these authors but brought concerns about the maternal body to the forefront of writing about oppressive historical and future societies.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, there was a key theoretical grappling within feminist theory about mothers that greatly expanded the ideas presented in the 1960s and 1970s. *From Margin to Center* by bell hooks (1984), Julia Kristeva's 1985 essay "Stabat Mater", Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* (1989), Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller's *Conflicts in Feminism* (1990), Bassin, Honey and Kaplan's edited collection *Representations of Motherhood* (1994), *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries* by Margrit Shildrick (1997) and Patrice DiQuinzio's *The Impossibility of Motherhood* (1999) rejected some claims of those earlier feminist texts regarding their concerns about motherhood as an obstacle to equality in favour of new ideas that were more representative of mothers' varied experiences and aspirations. These writers also carved out a space in the field of feminism for the scholarly examination of the maternal body, considering the multiplicity of meanings about the maternal body as a site of oppression and resistance. What follows in the first two decades of the twenty-first century is a relative explosion in the publication of texts on motherhood: theoretical, fictional, activist and those written for a broader non-academic audience. The growth of literature on the maternal in the twenty-first century I believe can be traced to two literary responses: the first in the late 1980s as a creative manifestation of the feminist political ideas of the 1960s and 70s; and again around 2000 as a creative response to the ideas circulating from the 1990s.

The texts I examine in this thesis from the twenty-first century repeat concerns about maternity explored in the earlier publications. While the thesis is an analysis of selected texts and not a survey of the entire literature on the maternal, the utilisation of the same two time periods in each main chapter shows the connection between two consecutive generations and

their concerns about motherhood and the maternal body. The analysis of texts from 1976 to1991 provides a context to these twenty-first-century concerns, allowing for the exploration of representations from the twentieth century, when the ideas of second-wave feminism were being published and widely discussed. Not all of the authors of these texts are women. The thesis is not focused on the gender or parental status of the author nor their intentions in writing about characters who mother. The texts were selected based on their use of dominant images of motherhood.

In order of publication the fifteen texts to be examined in this thesis are:

Blue Skies by Helen Hodgman (1976)

"Neighbours" from the short story collection *Scission* by Tim Winton (1985)

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood (1985)

Beloved by Toni Morrison (1987)

The Tax Inspector by Peter Carey (1991)

The Bride Stripped Bare by Nikki Gemmell (2003)

The Birth House by Ami Mckay (2006)

The Girls by Lori Lansens (2006)

Breath by Tim Winton (2008)

The Slap by Christos Tsiolkas (2008)

The Hand that First Held Mine by Maggie O'Farrell (2010)

Room by Emma Donoghue (2010)

The Mother's Group by Fiona Higgins (2012)

The Midwife's Daughter by Patricia Ferguson (2012)

Milk Fever by Lissa M. Cowan (2015)

The thesis uses close reading to discern patterns of representation of mothers and the maternal body in fiction repeated across this fifty-year period. This method of close reading

is informed by the analytical framework of dominant, residual and emergent as outlined by theorist Raymond Williams in his texts on theories of culture and cultural materialism (*Marxism and Literature*). Williams writes of four cultural elements that may work as counter-hegemonies to dominant cultural practices. These four different types of cultural elements are classified as alternative, oppositional, residual and emergent forms of cultural practice set in relation to dominant forms. Literature, music, visual and performance arts may provide these counter-hegemonies in the way they represent and critique certain aspects of dominant culture. The way they do this may be to explore complete alternatives or oppositions to the current hegemonic cultural practice.

Some texts examined in this thesis utilise dominant ideas about motherhood, such as the losses of individuality and sexual freedom, or seeing breastfeeding beyond the infant stage as transgressive. The texts which portray childbirth engage with dominant ideas about the medical model and natural model of childbirth, and about woman-centred care. Childbirth is also represented as a biological event horrifying to onlookers, but the high point of feminine power to the mother. In opposition to these dominant ideas is fiction that uses the technique of contrast to critique models of childbirth, narratives which centre the figure of the mother within a line of matrilineal descent and within a community of mothers. These texts draw attention to the mutually beneficial relationship between mother and child.

The thesis also makes extensive use of maternal scholarship and feminist theory to analyse these works of fiction for common manifestations of maternity that either reinforce or challenge dominant discourses of motherhood. In the words of Elizabeth Podnieks in her 2012 text *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture*, "the goals of maternal scholars" include the ability to "acknowledge current and normative maternal discourses, assess the impact they have on maternal realities, and consider how certain maternal practices can be read as "counter-narratives" to those discourses" (Podnieks 13). Podnieks borrows the term

"counter-narrative" from Andrea O'Reilly's work in *Mother Matters: Motherhood as Discourse and Practice* (2004). A goal of this thesis is to acknowledge the cultural dominance of certain ideas and images about mothers and read fictional texts for the possibility that they may offer a "counter-narrative" (O'Reilly, *Mother Matters* 15). In doing so, the thesis will conclude by articulating narrative techniques that I classify as having "emergent" qualities (Williams, "Base and Superstructure" 11), based on my research. The three main chapters in this thesis develop ideas around dominant and residual representations of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding in fiction.

For Raymond Williams, "in any society, in any particular period, there is a central system of practices, meanings and values" (9). These dominant features of a culture will always manifest themselves in literature, as "literature is there from the beginning as a practice in the society. Indeed, until it and all other practices are present, society cannot be seen as fully formed" (13). Therefore, literature becomes an important place in which to see the central values of a society forming. Not only does literature house the dominant ideas of a culture, but it also includes the manifestations of new social formations. In his 1973 article "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory", Williams moves beyond economically determinist Marxist analysis to extend the function of literature as "it represents the new feelings, the new meanings, the new values" (13) of a culture. For Williams, literature and other art forms therefore have the capacity to demonstrate "emergent" (11) culture that is new, counter-cultural, or oppositional to the dominant. Sitting in tension between the dominant forms of the culture and the emergent forms are "residual" forms of culture (10), which is the over-lap between historical values or practices of a culture, the superseded dominant understandings of the culture, and new appropriations of remnants of the past. This fusion is residual as it is not completely separate from the past, nor completely bound in the present understandings of a culture, nor entirely new. For example, in my chapter on

breastfeeding, the Madonna of the Milk is discussed as a residual image of motherhood that conveys individual and collective nourishment. The manifestation of breastfeeding in fiction depicts the practice as holding meaning beyond the nourishment of an individual infant to encompass the emotional nourishment of the mother and, in the example of Cowan's *Milk Fever*, the mother's community.

Williams' ideas have been useful to several scholars within the humanities to draw connections between culture and certain institutional structures, or connections between culture and written texts. John Clarke utilizes these key terms as broad, over-arching ideas to draw attention to the complexity of the relationships between aspects of welfare capitalism in the United Kingdom. Williams' concept has enabled Clarke to acknowledge that "in the face of totalizing narratives" (Clarke 984) about certain periods of history or specific welfare practices, scholars must be aware of the constant interplay between dominant, residual and emergent social forces when it comes to political, social and economic analysis. According to Clarke, Williams' ideas call for closer attention to be paid to the nuances and constant shifts operating within a society at any given time, and the need for historical analysis and future policy makers to be aware of the interdependency of various facets of society. Clarke is interested in how dominant features of welfare systems have a long history and "requires us to attend to the multiple tendencies and movements in play, and to recognise the hard political and cultural work that is needed to produce and sustain the dominance of the dominant" (984). My use of dominant, residual and emergent focuses on acknowledging and articulating the use of dominant and residual representations of the maternal in literature while foregrounding those qualities that are evidence of emergent and counter-dominant understandings of the maternal body.

Robert L. Sims used "the tripartite lens" (223) of the dominant, the residual and the emergent to discuss changes in styles of criticism of Colombian literature in 1994, looking in particular

at the work of Gabriel García Márquez. Sims' research demonstrates how the concept of cultural materialism can have uses beyond a broad understanding of culture and history to focus on the discipline of literature and dominance within written text. First, Sims outlines dominant types of literary criticism, then explains patterns of critique that show residual elements. This explanation is followed by pointing to new key theoretical texts that produce lasting change in the way Colombian literature is being discussed and critiqued. Sims argues that the latter are examples of new and emergent forms of criticism. In a slightly different manner to Sims, Rahmat Ollah Mahtabi uses these three key terms to discuss dominant and emergent forces operating within the world created by the fictional narratives of American author John Dos Passos. Mahtabi discussed the influence that these forces created within the world of the narrative and the impact that these societal forces have on the protagonists. Also looking closely at specific cultural texts, David Buchbinder uses concepts drawn from Williams to explore the representation of masculinity in popular culture, considering which representations might be deemed residual, emergent and counter to the dominant portrayal of white middle class masculinity in American comedy sitcoms. Buchbinder's use of dominant, residual and emergent most closely resembles the way in which I use Williams' terms to discuss the representation of the maternal in literature. To my knowledge, using Williams' tripartite concept has not been used before in the area of motherhood studies. I believe utilizing this method to analyse fiction works to highlight the relationship between literature and the social context in which literature is written. Fiction about mothers is not published in a vacuum, but is a literary manifestation of the concerns, ideals and developing ideas about mothers at play in the society in which the author creates the work.

It is the residual within the literature examined in this thesis which points to historical images of motherhood that have influenced present representations and how they are

currently being used. The emergent qualities identified in some novels point to future trends and understandings of the maternal body as represented through literature. The three broad emergent qualities that I identify in my examination are: fiction that uses the technique of contrast to draw attention to contradictory attitudes towards the maternal body; this is more specifically discussed as the contrasting birth scene; fiction that offers a complex and multi-faceted mother character and encases the character within a matrilineal history; and, thirdly fiction that focuses on the qualities of the mother-child dyad that are beneficial for the mother.These emergent qualities were found by close reading, and by identifying and examining each the beginnings of a counter-narrative centred on the maternal body can be seen. I argue that while the selection of texts provides narratives which are at times in opposition to dominant views of the maternal body, and in themselves are counter-narratives to the dominant view of maternity, literature on the maternal as a larger category is not yet at the emergent stage where the majority of texts are counter-narratives but rather the literature as a whole is at a pre-emergent stage.

Contribution to Knowledge

In addition to the concepts of Raymond Williams, the discussions presented in this thesis will aim to extend the arguments put forward by Austin Harrington in his 2002 article, “Knowing the social world through literature”, on the importance of analysing literary forms of writing to understand the complexities of a society and to provide important alternative forms of social research (51) and literature as a way to understand the complexities of a society Julie Stephens has used Harrington’s article as an example of the importance of the interdisciplinary development of maternal studies (Stephens, “Beyond Binaries” 91). The thesis will extend Harrington’s concept of the social importance of literary analysis by exploring the interaction of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic representations of pregnancy,

childbirth and breastfeeding as they appear in the selected fiction through the concept of dominant, residual and emergent portrayals and explore the interaction of hegemonic and counter hegemonic portrayals through the concept of dominant, residual and emergent. Representations of maternity as identified and discussed in this thesis relate to the sexualisation of the female breast, the medical model of care for pregnancy and childbirth, and the binary between autonomy and attachment. Each chapter explores images of the maternal that have archaic or historical aspects, before providing an analysis of the residual images presented in specific novels or short stories. I then document and explain aspects of fiction that I deem to have emergent qualities that offer unique, new and counter-cultural ways of representing the maternal body.

It is important for the wider field of maternal studies that nuanced shifts in literature, and its representation of the maternal, are documented and clearly analysed for future scholarship. Clarifying the dominant and residual representations of maternity helps both critics and readers to get a sense of emotions, concerns, triumphs and challenges regarding motherhood as a society moving forward after numerous waves of feminist theory and practice. Williams describes the understanding of these small but incremental changes in a society as "structure of feeling" (*The Long Revolution* 104). This term is helpful for a consideration of where feminist ideas and values around motherhood have often been in conflict (Hirsh and Keller; O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*). Analysing the structures of feeling relating to pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions and development of the nexus between feminism and motherhood.

Previous scholarship on literary representations of maternity has focused on texts published until the late-1980s. This thesis aims to address this gap in scholarship with a close, critical examination of more recent texts that also includes a wider range of authors. The novels of Emma Donoghue, Fiona Higgins, Patricia Ferguson, Ami McKay and Maggie

O'Farrell are examples from this thesis that are yet to be subject to the breadth of scholarly examination. This is contrasted with such authors as Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison and Enid Bagnold, whose use of maternal themes in their fiction has been more thoroughly researched (Cosslett; Eckard; Montelaro; Dally and Reddy). While research on the theme of motherhood to date has had a focus on North American and British authors, this thesis will also include a selection of Australian fiction and critical material; this is an underdeveloped area of literary and maternal studies, and an increased focus helps to develop scholarly understanding of how prevalent dominant images of the maternal are across Western nations.

The inclusion of Australian texts also contributes to Australian literary scholarship and its intersection with Australian maternal studies. Scholarship of Australian texts within literary maternal studies is under-represented in comparison to research on the maternal in fiction from North America and the United Kingdom. Maternal studies in Australia have strengthened in the past two decades (Bueskens and Pascoe Leahy), leading to publications that explore both local and global considerations of the maternal body, social practice and public policy about both mothering and motherhood. Pioneering the field of Australian maternal studies is Marie Porter who initiated the Association for Research on Mothering Australia, known by its acronym ARM-A, to expand on O'Reilly's scholarly network beyond the US and Canada. Porter's text *Transformative Power in Motherwork: A Study of Mothering in the 1950s and 1960s* was published in 2008. Along with Australian co-editor Julie Kelso, she published *Representing Maternal Realities* (2008) and *Mother-Texts: Narratives and Counter-Narratives* (2010). In 2015 she edited *Mothers at the Margins: Stories of Challenge, Resistance and Love* with Lisa Raith and Jenny Jones who were also office-bearers of ARM-A which is now known as Motherhood Scholars Australia.

Expanding upon Australian scholarship is Camilla Nelson and Rachel Robertson's 2018 edited volume *Dangerous Ideas about Mothers*, which brings together a collection of essays about contemporary Australian culture and our relationship to motherhood as a cultural idea. The contributors discuss a broad range of topics in relation to motherhood and the family, from domestic violence, parenting children with disability, the media and digital culture, social policy, psychology, to contemporary fatherhood. The volume contributes to a more recent understanding of the broader reach of maternal studies in the digital sphere, and the impact of social structures such as the court system upon mothers and their children.

Motherhood studies in Australia is a burgeoning interdisciplinary field of study that examines the implications of ideals about mothering in the lived experience of women in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The inclusion of Australian fiction in this thesis expands upon the work of both literary and maternal studies in Australia.

To date, there has been no single study that brings together pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding, and their representation in fiction from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Therefore, my research project will make a significant contribution towards the development of the critical study of the maternal in literature from a more recent period. This thesis will make a contribution to original research in this emerging field of motherhood studies and its literary sub-field, which remains under-developed.

My research expands upon the scholarly work already mapped out in the field of motherhood studies and extends it by framing it within literary analysis. Motherhood and mothering studies span disciplines and include psychology and psychoanalysis, history, healthcare and medicine, social policy and reform around mothers, care and work. This broad field also encompasses feminism and its intersection with motherhood, the arts, social media movements authored by mothers, parenting and infant care guides. The study of the maternal and its representation in the arts is a sub-field of this large body of scholarship. My study of

the maternal body and its relationship towards late twentieth and early twentieth-century fiction makes a substantial contribution to the body of knowledge both in literature and to maternal studies.

Parameters and Scope

The thesis is not a survey of fiction across the last fifty years nor is it an historical analysis of the changing representations of motherhood. It is a thematic study of popular examples of fiction that highlight common manifestations, recurring images and concerns about the maternal body. It articulates the possible sources of these dominant ideas about maternity and how these ideas are changing.

This research will not be undertaking a substantial discussion of any of the following: the absent mother; mothers as good or evil; the representation of mothers in fairy tales or fiction earlier than 1970; or representations in poetry, life-writing, plays or films. These topics have been the subject of previous scholarship by others and continue to be useful frameworks through which to explore aspects of maternity and motherhood. My emphasis is the analysis of fiction which focuses on the embodied work of motherhood.

My thesis features fiction that depicts birth mothers who raise their children, and as such the thesis is not concerned with the representation of fathers, surrogates, adoptive or stepparents. The thesis does not discuss gender-fluid mothering as it is not apparent in the plots featured in the novels and short story selected. Only fiction originally written in English has been selected, and no analysis is made of the gender or parental status of the authors of these works. While the topics not covered in the thesis are beyond the scope of this project, they are worthy of substantial future scholarship.

The research presented in this thesis suggests that fiction about embodied maternity from 1970 onwards is an important source of writing that documents the personal and social

impact of motherhood and its changing cultural practices in the form of the novel. Such fiction has shifted from its mid- to late twentieth century focus on more rigid and stereotypical representations of motherhood, to become a dynamic group of literary voices that have reflected, transmuted and, in some cases, challenged previous representations of the maternal body. Many of the mothers presented in the selected texts experience pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding within an Anglo-centric, middle-class setting. There is an expectation that the female characters experience autonomy and engage in ideas about mothering and mothering choices in many of the texts such as *The Slap*, *The Bride Stripped Bare* and *The Hand that First Held Mine*. At several points in the main chapters of this thesis, my analysis of mothers presented in works of historical fiction namely *The Midwife's Daughter*, *The Birth House* and *Beloved* show that characters from minority cultures and less privileged backgrounds provide rich grounds for exploring counter-narratives of motherhood.

This thesis argues that manifestations of the maternal body occurring in recent fiction have been influenced by the kind of discourse and advocacy around low-intervention and woman-focused antenatal and birth care. The breastfeeding mother has emerged as a literary subject in recent decades, reflecting the rise in health campaigns to promote higher breastfeeding rates among women globally, yet this remains a contested role in social practice and literary culture.

The research suggests that literary texts which represent pregnant, birthing, or breastfeeding characters do so while engaging with concepts prevalent in earlier fiction that centred on the problematic female body and the autonomy of the maternal body. The themes emerging from these newer examples of literary fiction show there remains a concern about maternal fluids and abjection, birth, horror and violence. In addition, newer fictional narratives have repeatedly represented the control of the breastfeeding body in public spaces.

These manifestations echo earlier concerns around the control and representation of the maternal body that can still be seen in fiction published in the twenty-first century. The thesis provides conclusions about two key types of literary representations of maternity: those texts that reinforce residual images of motherhood, and those texts that challenge residual images and provide emergent qualities in the representations of motherhood.

Method

The method utilised in this thesis is the close reading of fiction that highlights pregnancy, the postpartum period, childbirth or breastfeeding. This method involves detailed analysis of the representation of maternity and discusses the portrayal of the main maternal character, as well as secondary characters and consideration of overall themes in the novel or short story and the plot structure. While close reading has traditionally been associated with formalism and New Criticism (Welleck and Warren), where the close reading disregards the cultural and historical context of the work that has been written, my close reading utilises a cultural materialist method as put forward in the work of Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (1977). This method approaches literature as a culturally produced form of art, operating within and influenced by the society in which it is written. Caroline Levine explains that:

> instead of understanding cultural experience as a secondary reflection of the means of production, Williams (1977:41) argued that literature was itself part of the "productive process". (Levine 424)

Williams moved away from traditional Marxist understandings of culture and the arts as a reflection of the economic or political structures. He saw a dynamic movement between culture producing and reflecting various changing social movements. Literature enables us to see "the social character and the structure of feeling" (Williams, *The Long Revolution* 121) of

a period, noting that different authors, or genres of text, reflect and produce different aspects of the culture in which that text was formed. Past work and traditions also inform future writers, and so there is never a clear boundary in literature between reflection and production and its affect upon changing social values and behaviour.

While the gender or parental status of the author is not of consideration to the method I have employed, my method considers the decade in which the novel or short story has been published and texts on similar themes published within the same period. This is done so that common concerns about the maternal across several texts of the same period can be examined to ascertain hegemonic or culturally dominant understandings of maternity in particular time periods. My method of close reading along with a consideration of its cultural and historical context is not limited by details of the author's life or political orientation or opinions on motherhood. The method that is employed in this thesis focuses on the representations and meanings that can be gleaned by reading the fiction and how this fiction can be understood in the context of the society in which it was produced.

Elaine Showalter's 1981 article "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" emphasises the role that cultural context plays in feminist criticism of women's writing. She writes that:

> a theory of culture incorporates ideas about woman's body, language, and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur. The ways in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environments. (197)

While my reading of the fifteen texts do not take into account the gender of the author, and focuses on discussing the images of motherhood rather than the author's intention, I read the maternal body in the writing of both male and female authors as manifestations of a specific "women's culture" which "forms a collective experience within the cultural whole" (197). While these texts are not all written by women, they nonetheless describe a dominant view of

the experience of womanhood. The fourteen authors in my study (there are two texts written by Tim Winton) write the maternal body within the context of a particular plot, set in a specific time period and location. While each text is unique, there are clear thematic connections between the ways in which the pregnant, birthing and breastfeeding body is imagined within these narratives. In this way, the fifteen texts can be read as a selection describing the "collective experience" of dominant ideas about maternity in literature across the span of fifty years within a western, industrialised context.

Discussions on the literary representation of embodied maternity consider feminist criticism on the female body and scholarship in the field of motherhood and mothering studies, together with literary criticism. Showalter highlights the relationship between literature and feminist theory as closer and more relevant to the feminist critical project she envisaged than previous literary theory centred on male modes of writing ("Feminist Criticism" 184). This relationship is echoed in my theoretical framework, which brings together an understanding of cultural context through the tripartite concept of dominant, residual and emergent representations alongside feminist theory that foregrounds the meanings and structures of motherhood. The analysis of the selected fiction in light of both literary and wider feminist criticism leads to a discussion in each chapter of residual and emergent images of the maternal body.

The thesis is separated into three main topic areas, which then form respective chapters: pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. They are discussed in the order of their biological occurrence to account for ideas that are recurring across these three aspects of embodied maternity. Each chapter is a self-sufficient examination of residual, dominant and possible emergent qualities in the selection of fiction. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Emma Donoghue's *Room* feature across both the childbirth and breastfeeding chapters. These texts are engaged in "foregrounding the maternal body" (Frampton 145) and provide scope to

discuss the representation of multiple embodied aspects of maternity. The texts present significant examples of the containment of the maternal body, a theme that is present in both the childbirth and breastfeeding chapters. The aim of each chapter is to discuss the residual and dominant understandings of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding, then to critically examine which aspects of these texts may be considered emergent. In seeking emergent qualities in these texts, I am searching for new and counter-hegemonic ways the texts might speak of the maternal body, and how are they resisting, challenging or subverting previous understandings of what it means to be a pregnant, childbearing, or breastfeeding subject.

Analytical Framework

I employ three overarching frameworks alongside my close reading of the fifteen selected fictional texts: writing maternity, theorising maternity and practicing maternity. These frameworks inform the social context around the selected fiction and assist me to identity the dominant, residual and emergent qualities of each of these texts.

Writing Maternity

The first framework of the thesis focuses on literary criticism on the maternal body. This scholarly material arises in response to maternal themes in literature, and by its nature operates differently to the other two frameworks. While theorising and practicing maternity as frameworks can, in time, influence the discourse around mothers and therefore the future development of fictional trends and representations of mothers in literature, writing maternity as a framework develops in response to literature already written. It critiques the content in the stories on the maternal body and provides a scholarly way of reflecting on and

interrogating the literary representation of the maternal. This framework is useful as it focuses closely on literature as one mode of discourse on the maternal, and it extrapolates its strands according to specific authors, texts and time periods.

I note here that this framework is specific to critique about the maternal as presented in fiction, rather than the critique or discourse around mothers as writers. Susan Rubin Suleiman has written on this specific aspect of maternal writing in her 1994 text *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature*. She discusses the difficult nature of being seen as both mother and writer within the confines of the ideal mother, as described by both Petra Bueskens and Ann Dally. Suleiman discusses two main "themes" in the work of writers who are mothers: "motherhood as obstacle or source of conflict and motherhood as link, as source of connection to work and world" (22). While her ideas are specific to authors who are mothers, I have extrapolated these two themes across the literary analysis of fiction on the maternal; these themes shall be detailed in the upcoming chapters that explore the transition to new motherhood presented in the fiction on pregnancy and the post-partum period.

Key texts of literary criticism on the representation of the maternal in fiction have come from the UK and US scholars looking at literature published in these regions. Carol H. Poston's 1978 article "Childbirth in Literature" is a key work of scholarship that I develop in chapter 3, on the representations of childbirth. She charts twentieth-century European representations across three main categories of portrayal of the birthing woman: as animal, as savage and as schizoid. Tess Cosslett's *Women Writing Childbirth: Modern Discourses of Motherhood* (1994) considers a range of writing genres, from practical guides preparing mothers-to-be for childbirth to well-known literary examples of novels and poetry including *Beloved*, as well as texts by Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, A.S. Byatt and poets Sharon Olds, Sylvia Plath and Alicia Ostriker. Her work on the representation of the "primitive

woman" (10) and the relationship that the discourse of natural childbirth has in relation to this image—along with the traditional image of the older "crone" figure (31) and the relevance of the midwife to examples of historical fiction—has been especially useful in the development of my chapter on childbirth. Cosslett's text emphasises the influence of discourse in the representation of childbirth. According to Cosslett, discourse around natural childbirth and around the medical model of maternity care are both "cultural products of particular historical moments" (3). In her view, historical understandings of childbirth are important to a thorough scholarly critique of current representations of this maternal experience.

Brenda O. Dally and Maureen T. Reddy's edited collection *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities* (1991) offers a critique of the work published by female British and American authors. Essays consider the work of Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, Alice Walker and Louise Erdrich, among some lesser-known American short story writers and the life writing of Jane Lazarre. Julie Tharp and Susan McCallum-Whitcomb's *This Giving Birth: Pregnancy and Childbirth in American Women's Writing* (2000) explores a variety of fiction and poetry, acknowledging the growing number of titles written since the late 1980s that explore the ways in which women writers have creatively represented the maternal body in their work. Essays on poetry explore the contrast between male poets' use of maternal metaphors to describe their creativity, compared to women's writing, which speaks of the literal experience of pregnancy and childbirth (2-3). In the collection Andrea O'Reilly discusses ideas of motherhood and birth in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and *The Bluest Eye,* and Brenda Dally explores the theme of incest and maternal agency in Sapphire's *Push* and Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie.* The research in this volume points to connections I take up in my thesis between sexuality, maternity and violence. This volume demonstrates the multiple ways maternal themes manifest in women's writing from the generation after second-wave feminism.

Mary-Ruth Marotte's *Captive Bodies: American Women Writers Redefine Pregnancy and Childbirth* (2008) explores two meanings of captivity in her text: the act of being confined against one's will, and the state of being captivated by another, namely by the child growing within. The text draws upon historical slave narratives alongside novels and letters and, in a similar vein to Tharp and McCallum-Whitcomb's volume, Marotte dedicates a chapter to the exploration of African American representations of maternity. *Captive Bodies* also discusses the impact of Kate Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening* in encouraging women writers to write about the experiences of motherhood.

Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly's edited collection *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures* (2010) has been a useful text for the development of my chapter on pregnancy, particularly as it draws on the themes of maternal absence, ambivalence, agency and communication. This volume also provides essays on literature outside of the United States and United Kingdom and scholarship on lesbian mothering in literature. The 2016 special edition on "Mothers, Mothering and Motherhood in Literature" of the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* considers scholarship on more recent authors, such as Jamaica Kincaid, Lionel Shriver and J.K. Rowling. The theme of motherhood in the work of Kincaid has also featured in Abigail L. Palko's *Imagining Motherhood in Contemporary Irish and Caribbean Literature* (2016), which critiques Irish and Caribbean novels from the late 1980s and 1990s for a "maternal imaginary" (13) and reads these texts considering contested ideas about good motherhood, the Catholic Church and citizenship. Palko frames her postcolonial reading of these texts around themes such as mothering the nation, abortion and trauma, as well as the complexities of mother-daughter relationships. Maternal abandonment, lesbian mothers and lesbian daughters are also considered as key themes. Palko utilises the symbol of the placenta to demonstrate the interrelation between Irish and Caribbean canons

of women's writing and the focus on the experience of femininity and motherhood. This text makes an important contribution to literary studies of the maternal in that it recognises the wider political, religious and racial contexts that surround the creation of fictional worlds in which mothers are symbolic of the tensions present in the wider society. While not explicitly using a cultural materialist framework, there are similarities between my use of wider cultural frameworks to read the fiction examined in this thesis and the way that Palko reads the nation through the lens of the mother and the daughter.

In 2018, the journal *Women: A Cultural Review* published a special edition on representations of motherhood in the twenty-first century. In their introduction to the special issue, editors Heffernan and Wilgus provide a summary of media trends in the portrayal of the mother in the twenty-first century. These "exemplary images that have played a role in shaping the public discourse on motherhood" (xx) are taken from popular parenting literature, visual advertising, television serials and commercial films. The result of this is:

> mothers are idealized, depicted almost exclusively as white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual and married; they are usually of the 'right' age (neither too old nor too young) and have the 'right' number of children (neither too few nor too many). Moreover, these 'perfect' mothers inevitably appear blissfully happy, to 'have it all together' and to love every moment of their motherhood. (4)

Countering these images, the 2018 special issue of *Women: A Cultural Review* offers alternative views of motherhood from the point of view of migrant mothers, single mothers, queer mothers and women without children, as explored in twenty-first-century media. Heffernan and Wilgus argue that the saturation of media representations of motherhood as a fulfilling role within the confines of a nuclear family, homogenous in its representation of wealth, health and race, fuels a "discourse" (14) on motherhood that leaves many women marginalised. They note that this marginalisation occurs to those women with and without

children. Counter expressions of motherhood in popular and mainstream media serve as both critique and alternative to discourse on ideal motherhood and calls into question the validity of these ideals. These maternal ideals from the twentieth century, as depicted in fiction, are established and closely scrutinised in my examination of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding, and my analysis contributes to broadening the discussion around the cultural representations of motherhood.

More specifically, with regard to the critical analysis of literature, my method of close analysis of fiction builds upon the exploration of tropes established in the work of Megan Rogers, who identifies the "narrative closure" (Rogers 102) of death and madness in transgressive female characters. I also expand the scholarship laid out by Carol Poston and Tess Cosslett in the representation of the birthing mother in literature. I develop upon the work of Alison Bartlett who examined the multiplicity of meanings present with the breastfeeding relationship as it relates to contemporary culture in *Breastwork: Rethinking Breastfeeding* (2005).

Megan Rogers continues the late twentieth century scholarship by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in particular, who identified key manifestations of madness in the writing of Victorian women. Their influential text *The Madwoman in the Attic*, published in 1979, discussed tropes of doubles, mirrors, split selves and confinement in the work of key authors such as Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson. While Rogers discusses the ongoing interpretation of madness as rebellion by feminist scholars since the publication of Gilbert and Gubar's text, she argues that madness can equally be read as silencing, and a trope that reinforces female characters as passive and without agency. Rogers utilises a matricentric approach she terms "the maternal journey" (166) to free writers and plots from the constraints of literature that consistently silences transgressive women. This "maternal journey" does not consist of biological associations to motherhood and is "not

designed as an essentialist reading" (166), but invokes the maternal for its focus on agency, self-love and care of others. My chapter on the representation of pregnancy and the postpartum period expands upon Rogers' reading of madness as "narrative closure" (102) where "the protagonist can be seen as more tragic than transformational" (110). My reading incorporates fiction that maintains residual understandings of womanhood and wifehood from the Victorian era juxtaposed with twenty-first-century representations of individual womanhood and motherhood. I too read madness as tragedy rather than rebellion, brought about by the lack of transition from woman to mother and a failed "matrescence" (Raphael 66). Where my reading expands upon both Gilbert and Gubar's work and Rogers' *Finding the Plot: A Maternal Approach to Madness in Literature* (2017) is the intentional focus on the figure of the mother. I argue that there are tropes and manifestations of the maternal that can illuminate feminist readings of women's writing and the representation of female characters.

Poston and Cosslett describe common representations of childbirth in twentieth-century fiction, concentrating on fiction from Europe and North America. They both identify key characterisations of the birthing mother and, in Cosslett's case, the figure of the midwife or female birth assistant. My thesis expands upon their work in the chapter on the representations of childbirth by drawing these tropes into the wider understanding of dominant, residual and emergent representations of childbirth. I examine how the characterisations identified by Poston and Cosslett have either been reinforced in twenty-first-century fiction, undergone changes to establish newer meanings, or made significant shifts away from these traditional representations. In my analysis of the texts, Williams' tripartite concepts of dominant, residual and emergent frame Poston and Coslett's research within a wider understanding of common manifestations and concerns around the representation of the maternal body, as well as cultural understandings of the work of the labouring and birthing female body, within the literary tradition. Feminist scholarship from

the late twentieth century and beyond assists to highlight both the positive and problematic aspects of such representations of the physical work of labour and birth by literary characters.

Alison Bartlett continued the groundwork laid by earlier scholars such as Iris Marion Young in establishing key contemporary changes to cultural representations of breastfeeding in *Breastwork* (2005). Her research identified the possibilities of new understandings of breastfeeding as a practice and as a part of the wider social fabric. Her work articulates traditional meanings of breastfeeding and juxtaposes them with twenty-first-century manifestations. My chapter on the representation of breastfeeding in literature expands on her work by reading these manifestations within the scope of fiction to explore and discuss the meanings of breastfeeding that are common to literary representations of embodied motherhood, as well as to look to emergent representations.

My close reading of literature that depicts the pregnant, birthing and breastfeeding body takes into account three key strands. The first strand utilises the method of Williams' tripartite concept of dominant, residual and emergent, which looks at literature as one form of representing culture, but a form that is dynamic and part of our wider cultural understanding of maternity and motherhood. It enables the analysis of literary history in terms of its nuanced movements back and forth between archaic, historical and new forms of representing the maternal body. Williams' concepts pinpoint the intersection within each example of fiction of both old and new forms of characterising the physical and emotional work of maternity.

The second strand is the process of locating significant images of the maternal body from literary traditions and examining their traditional and contemporary meanings. This strand is informed by works summarised in the writing maternity section. The fallen "eternal madwoman" (Rogers 137), the breastfeeding Madonna and the birthing woman as animal, are all representations with a long literary and cultural history. Their impact on the representation

of maternity and continued use in fiction is established within Williams' tripartite framework as a means to connect the historical with the contemporary.

The third strand, in my close reading of literature depicting the maternal body, is the relationship between literary analysis and feminist discourse on the maternal. The close reading is presented in chapters 2-4 and is informed by the section on theorising maternity. The concepts and readings articulated by Rogers, Poston, Cosslett, Bartlett and others within this thesis support my reading of the literary representation of the maternal body, with the understanding that theories of motherhood and theories of feminism have a dynamic interrelationship. It is my interweaving of dominant, residual and emergent with aspects of literary history and feminist thought on mothers that brings me to the conclusion that literature on the maternal in the twenty-first century relies heavily on residual images of idealised motherhood from the Victorian era. This reliance on the tropes of madness, the animal and the Madonna, for the most part, seem to overshadow the possibilities of emergent understandings of the maternal body in literature. However, it is with close reading and careful interrogation of my selected texts that emergent qualities also can be found. It is these emergent qualities that expand our understanding of what the maternal means in the twenty-first century. These three strands provide the context for the ways in which maternity has been read in fiction before and influences my own close reading of the selected texts examined in this thesis.

In selecting the fifteen fictional texts for analysis in this thesis, I have drawn upon two of the key examples of fiction mentioned above in my discussion of key texts on literature and motherhood. These two texts are Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The inclusion of these texts that have already been the subject of substantive scholarship is to continue to expand the work of previous scholars on key novels deemed formative to the literary exploration of motherhood. The deliberate inclusion of only

two of these texts in my selection is to enable scope in my discussions to bring new literature, particularly from Australia, into the same scholarly inquiry. My thesis looks to articulate and clarify the dominant and residual images of the maternal, as well as find any emergent qualities that pave the way for new understandings of the maternal in literature.

Theorising Maternity

Origins: The Development of Motherhood and Maternal Identity

In her 2018 text *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* Australian scholar Petra Bueskens offers a synthesis of the developing role of the mother from the early modern period in Europe to its present form, including developments in maternal work/life balance in Australia. This text offers a foundation from which to understand the development of the contemporary mothering role from its earliest formations, and how western European notions of the individual and the mother from the early modern period continue to impact twenty-first-century western women, including those from Australia. Bueskens' analysis of the changing role of the mother in history is useful to inform a close reading of contemporary fictional narratives of motherhood. From this history, Bueskens argues that two key roles developed, creating a "duality" (3) inherent in motherhood today. This duality is based on traditional figures: "the angel of the house" (Patmore) who anchors both society and the family unit within the domestic and private sphere; and the "New Woman" (Heilmann) who seeks civil engagement in the public sphere. Bueskens establishes that these two roles coalesce in today's culture of motherhood, leading to contradictions in mothers attempting to occupy two competing ideals within the same identity. Susan Maushart describes this phenomenon succinctly as "the juggled life" (229).

The rise of the Industrial period in early modern Europe heralded a great change in gender roles. Prior to this, peasant men and women worked alongside each other in agricultural roles and lived among extended families in villages linked by kinship and governed by nobility. Both peasant and noble households were patriarchal, and property was passed down through the male line. With the establishment of factories, towns and later cities, the changing nature of work created two domains: the public and the private. Living outside of multi-generational families and losing much of the previous connections of kin and village, middle-class women became the key figure of a new domestic domain that centred on child-rearing and the establishment of a domestic order that facilitated the movement of the individual male between work outside of the home and leisure within the home (Bueskens 97-101). Bueskens describes how:

> a new hegemonic ideal was established and it was against this ideal that all adult women were measured. Maternity was concomitantly redefined as a vocational path and exclusive calling. (8-9)

While the working-class continued to have both men and women in lowly paid employment, the challenges of childcare outside of previous village structures meant that women remained dependent upon marriage for financial stability. The increasing dependence of women with children upon another person to bring in enough income to supplement the meagre income of the working-class mother led to the rise of the full-time bread-winner role and the full-time mother (108). Regardless of which class they belonged to, Bueskens argues, women in Europe were not granted citizenship in the newly democratised nation states until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (98). The role of the homemaker and mother took on new relevance, and so did the value attributed to the full-time, stay-at-home mother.

Other factors apart from economics influenced the development of the new intensive role of the house-bound, full-time mother, although the changes in production brought about

by the Industrial Revolution dramatically shaped the nature of home and work. Ann Dally charts the development of new ideas about childrearing emerging from the newly established discipline of psychoanalysis. These ideas intensified the need for the full-time mother and discouraged any separation between mother and child until school age. Coupled with increases in life expectancy and improved health care brought about by developments in the nineteenth-century, Dally argues that psychoanalysis helped to cement the role of the full-time mother as an ideal to which late twentieth century mothers are still bound. In particular, the works of Sigmund Freud, D.W. Winnicott, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and John Bowlby significantly changed popular attitudes towards the needs of the infant and young child. Collectively, these theorists argued for increased mother-baby attachment, undivided attention to the child by the mother, as the primary caregiver, and emphasis on discipline, stimulation and learning, supported by published expert advice (Dally 82-87). What stimulated this research into the needs of infants was the surge in orphans after World War I, and the changing nature of family circumstances across Europe and North America in between the two world wars, including the Great Depression. Domestic servants in the UK, who would ordinarily have provided substantial childcare, became more difficult and expensive to acquire. Childcare provided by the state, to enable married mothers to assist with the war effort, was closed upon the arrival of returning soldiers. High rates of unemployment after WWII led to a societal push for married women to return to their domestic duties to allow men to resume paid employment (Dally 145).

John Bowlby's work was published after the work of Sigmund. Freud, D.W. Winnicott, Anna Freud and Melanie Klein. His report to the World Health Organisation in 1951 on the welfare of orphans in institutions eventually led to wider changes in the value attributed to the mother as the child's key adult to the exclusion of all others. Dally surmises that Bowlby's ideas became so widespread as "a result of women's difficult social role at the

time" (98). The ideas of mothers as the most natural and ideal of all caregivers for a child reached its height after WWII, fuelled by government need to resume full male employment and stimulate spending. The mother became not only the caregiver but the full-time homemaker, "spending the money that has been earned elsewhere" (Dally 105). Work and family life had been completely separated by the late nineteenth-century and home became a place that was "separate, private, and is supposed to be a place for leisure and repose, intimacy and childrearing" (105). As the notion of the family home grew into an ideal for the middle-class, so did the role of the woman who became the keeper of this domain. Dally writes that despite the word "mother" existing in ancient languages, the concept of "motherhood" as a life stage or vocation "grew with idealization. And, during the Victorian era, the idealization of the mother strengthened the idealization of the wife and woman" (Dally 17). This emphasis on the work and pleasures of the domestic sphere, and the encouragement of consumerism of newly developed household goods in the post-second world-war period (Dally 96-97) meant the idealisation of the married woman and mother reached its zenith by the middle of the twentieth century.

Mothering, according to both Dally and Bueskens, became a more intensive and individual occupation over the centuries since the Industrial Revolution and became bound to ideals about domestic harmony and morality. The figure of the "Angel of the House" first entered the literary imagination in 1854 with the publication of English poet Coventry Patmore's narrative poem in four volumes of the same name, which extolled the virtues of the role of wife and mother. In the Epilogue to the second book, Vaughan and his wife and family are stopped by a colleague:

> For, crossing the Cathedral Lawn,
>
> There came an ancient college-friend,
>
> Who, introduced to Mrs. Vaughan,

Lifted his hat, and bow'd and smiled.

And fill'd her kind large eyes with joy,

By patting on the cheek her child,

With, 'Is he yours, this handsome boy?' (Patmore, Book 2 192)

Coventry's character, Mrs. Vaughan, is held up as a model wife and mother. Her joy in this brief quotation comes from the recognition by others of the way she has reared her son. He is outwardly handsome, but the implication given in the question "Is he yours?" is that by her maternal virtues, Mrs. Vaughn has raised a boy who is socially acceptable, which in turn reflects positively upon not only his mother but his father. Her "joy" is the social outcome of her private domestic work. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar trace the origins of the angel of the house from medieval devotions to the mother of Christ, with "a clear line of literary descent from divine Virgin to domestic angel" (Gilbert and Gubar 21). The angel of the house typifies the virtues of the Virgin Mary: pure, maternal, selfless and with the ability to provide comfort to the multitudes. Not only was the mother the queen of the domestic realm but "she is the linchpin of marriage as it was imagined in the nineteenth century" (Hoffman 264). The angel of the house was a literary figure that served to elevate the status of the mother and her role as sole caregiver while simultaneously cementing her importance to marital and household harmony. Her accomplishments within domesticity reflected upon her husband's status (Hoffman 265) and was an important part of social success.

Women's nurturing and reproductive attributes were regarded as ideal for this private role, allowing men to enter newly founded liberal democracies as "equal citizens" (Bueskens 106) free from previous feudal ties. The move from subsistence earning on farms to wage earning in factories and growing industries from the late 1700s gradually led to larger families and an increased acknowledgement of the need for love and companionship between married couples (106). The decrease in kin and village ties led to stronger ties within the

nuclear family unit, and within it "was the mother who stood at the centre of this new family constellation" (110). The late 1700s saw an interest in Jean-Jaques Rousseau's publication *Emile* and the ideals of a mother breastfeeding her own infant and taking a more conscious approach to the child's nutrition, growth and spiritual and intellectual development (111). Now separated into a nuclear family unit and away from extended family living, "the modern mother embarked on an historically unprecedented journey: *the task of mothering alone*[1]" (113). This development did not sit easily with the upper class who continued to rely on employed nannies. The working class could not afford a full-time mother at home. This soon gave rise to "expert" advice to mothers via manuals and other clerical and medical literature to convince all classes that mothers needed to be at home with their children, full-time (115).

Despite the emphasis on the private and domestic sphere as the appropriate place for women in modern Europe, and the arrival of the concept of "motherhood" as a moral and social role (109), the concept of individualism became a key problem for mothers, and for feminist theory, argues Bueskens. While liberal thought emphasised that all men were born free and were equal, this belief did not extend to women, who remained by law under the male head of the household, either their father or their husband. Ironically, it was the domestic and child-rearing work done by women in the private sphere of the home that allowed men to enter democratic public life in Europe without the visible constraints of dependents. This cemented women's role in the home and undermined the concept of individualism which was based on the subjugation of women (80). Feminism is also based on the concepts of individualism and freedom, first raised in the Enlightenment; it is the belief in the equal rights of women as free and individual subjects. However, Bueskens argues that feminism is still grappling with strategies to negotiate the dual role that women now have after the gains of first- and second-wave feminism. While the first wave of feminism saw

[1] Italics in the original text.

women achieving the right to vote, and the second wave brought improvements to education, legal rights and reproductive rights, the dual role of mother both within and outside the home remains problematic.

The rise of the "New Woman" (Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction* 198) who moved outside the domestic sphere with confidence has been credited to a series of articles published by both feminist and anti-feminist women writers in the *North American Review* in 1894. Scholar Ann Heilmann charts the development of this cultural figure from the popular press to spawn a genre of New Woman fiction by women writers in the late 1800s (*New Woman Fiction* 198, 203). The New Woman figure was young and open to the new opportunities of the public sphere, advocating for her rights and fighting against injustice (199-200). According to Bueskens, the New Woman:

> was such a profound threat to the modern social order . . . If women were to leave their roles . . . the internal workings of the privatised family would collapse, and because this family structure functioned as the foundation for the public realm (both capitalist market and democratic state) these two would be subject to profound transformation. The individualised woman disrupts the very foundations of modern capitalist society for she disrupts the gendering on which it is built (115).

The central argument that Bueskens puts forward is that feminism remains a contested site, where the angel of the house and the New Woman continue to clash. Twenty-first-century childless women, thanks to the gains of the feminist movement of previous generations, have now been able to enter the individualised public domain, but it is mothers who are struggling with the public/private divide. Women who become mothers remain situated in the tenuous space between accessing public life through work outside of the home and the intensive responsibilities of the private spheres. Her empirical research explores the strategies of twenty-first-century mothers who take deliberate periods of absence from the domestic

sphere, termed “revolving maternal absence” (229), in order to begin a transformation process at home where the individual and the mother can both exist and be valued at once.

While *Modern Motherhood and Women’s Dual Identities* is a text based on sociological methods of research and analysis, its engagement with the current preoccupations of feminist thought alongside the empirical research collected from mothers can be used to inform the representations of mothers in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century literature. The mother characters in the novels set in the twenty-first century examined in this thesis engage with the contested spaces of the public and private domain. They are writers, artists, elite athletes, tax inspectors and other white-collar professionals whose pregnancies cause a fissure between the realm of the individual woman and the new domain of motherhood.

Within the last fifty years, women have gained a strong sense of the individualism initially granted only to men. However, Bueskens argues that now motherhood has moved away from being seen as a social good and a moral value to an “*individualised risk*” (167), as both women and men know the social and economic consequences of family life in neo-liberal society. The consequences and constraints for mothers on living an individual life do not appear to impact men and childless women to the same extent, prompting Bueskens to conclude that “*women are now free as individuals and constrained as mothers”* (168). Despite the relative recency of Bueskens’ 2018 text, we hear similar concern from Julia Kristeva, who asked in 1977 “when today women make their voices heard, the issues of conception and maternity are a major focus of discontent” (Kristeva, “Stabat Mater” 135). It seems that the concept of motherhood remains problematic well beyond the twentieth century.

Adding to this “structure of feeling” (Williams, *The Long Revolution* 104) about motherhood, Jaqueline Rose sees the figure of the mother in the twenty-first century as

approaching mythic proportions, a figure that holds the responsibility of not only the growth and happiness of the individual mother's children, but of the world's children, and therefore the entire society. Rose believes this idealisation of motherhood has built with a pressure so intense that mothers themselves have become "the scapegoat for our personal and political failings, for everything that is wrong with the world, which it becomes the task—unrealisable of course—of mothers to repair" (Rose 1). With this overwhelming burden to be a mother, coupled with the restraint from opportunity outside of the home, comes a deep sense of loss for life before motherhood and either a new acknowledgement or refusal of a burgeoning maternal self. In the words of Susan Maushart on the "juggle" between the growing opportunities for women of an individual life and the maternal life, she writes:

> For women, the sudden expansion of options is reaching a kind of critical mass, in which the disjuncture between expectations and realities has grown absurdly and painfully wide. The price we are paying for our newfound 'privileges' is enormous. (237)

Maushart is speaking of the great divide between the potential offered by individualism and the realities of the continued constraints of the domestic sphere, a sphere that both Bueskens and Maushart point out has statistically remained the domain of women despite the mass entry of women into the public realm (Maushart 255-64). This has led to a common feeling among women, echoed in literary characters, of the arrival of motherhood as the loss of a previous freedom. On this notion of motherhood and loss, and the relationship between maternal responsibilities and individual freedom, Maushart explains:

> To the extent that women of old were socialised to accept the 'loss of self' as a precondition for feminine identity, in other words, they were admirably prepared for a seamless transition to the mothering role. To the extent that women of our

> generation have escaped such socialization . . . we approach the milestone of motherhood like strangers in a strange land. It follows that the greater the autonomy a woman enjoyed in her life before motherhood, the more acutely she will experience its loss. (154-155)

This phenomenon of loss that appeared towards the end of the twentieth century has impacted the fictional narratives of motherhood published in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The impact of this loss of self at the outset of new motherhood and the struggle to negotiate the two parts of the self—the free individual and the maternal—are captured in stories about mothers and their experiences of embodied maternity.

Feminist Critique and the "Problem" of Motherhood

> Some of the most heated social and political debates taking place in late-twentieth-century America turn out to revolve around disputed meanings of mothering and motherhood in contemporary society. (Glenn 1)

With this statement, Evelyn Nakano Glenn introduced a series of essays unpacking this "contested terrain" and its development as a discipline arising out of feminism and gender studies, in the 1994 collection titled *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency*. Abortion, reproductive technology, work and family policies and female priesthood are some of the areas of research she cited that were under scholarly critique in the mid-1990s (1). These issues had their origins in the development of feminist critique in the late 1960s, which began as a movement to argue for equality in education, the workforce and sexuality (de Beauvoir, Freidan). However, from its beginning, American second-wave feminist pioneers such as Shulamith Firestone found motherhood and the biological family with the mother as the primary caregiver a problematic notion requiring new discourse to negotiate. Feminist writing

of the early second wave, not only in North America but across the United Kingdom and Australia (Greer), began a critical discussion around notions of womanhood that would move away from the perceived limitations of the life of a housewife and mother and open new opportunities for women. These new possibilities for women were claimed through campaigns which increased access to a wider range of occupations, equal pay for equal work and reproductive technologies such as the contraceptive pill and abortion. Motherhood, despite the contested space it occupied in this emerging field of feminist studies, also forced those theorising within this discourse to become creative with new ways of thinking about mothers and their practice. While feminism as a social movement successfully initiated new opportunities for women, mothers who considered themselves to be part of this feminist movement sought a feminism that was sympathetic to their concerns about their dual role of woman and mother (Rich, Lazarre, O'Reilly *Matricentric Feminism*) and the opportunities and challenges of bringing the two together.

Feminism was emerging as a set of ideas around the role of women in society, which became a social movement that encouraged the emergence of grassroots campaigns to advocate for change. Academic theories were then advanced to explore these emerging ideas, and these theories viewed motherhood very differently to the maternalist movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Maternalism of that period advocated for a social value and political meaning to the work of child-rearing:

> To protect, nurture, and train children, mothers must have access to the conditions that will allow them to flourish as persons: bodily integrity, moral autonomy, material security, relational integrity, and political efficacy. (Brush 430)

Feminism as a social movement and an emerging academic discourse was concerned with forging this integrity, autonomy, security, integrity and efficacy beyond the role of woman as mother to woman as a whole person, independent of their status as mother or non-mother. In

the development of academic feminism, discussions of ways to value motherhood created a discourse alongside concepts of the feminine body, women's participation in workforce and education, sexual autonomy and reproductive rights, feminist strategies for women of colour and minority groups and violence against women. These concepts were debated, theorised and expanded to create a rich and developing field of feminist studies, continuing to negotiate the need for motherhood to become a vital part of this growing field.

My use of a broad range of feminist approaches that incorporate ideas from French feminism of the late twentieth century, as well as North American and Australian theories show the ongoing engagement between western feminist ideas well into the twenty-first century. While approaches may vary slightly because of generation or geographic region, the concerns about mothers share similarities. O'Brien Hallstenin refers to this broad number of theoretical approaches as "white feminists" (O'Brien Hallstein 'matriphobic sisters' 269) incorporating theories that interrogate ideas of motherhood within the same western philosophical traditions. Europe, North America, Britain and The Commonwealth shared similar feminist goals although their trajectories differed. As seen in Bueskens' *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities,* her analysis of western motherhood practices is begun by an initial analysis into mothering in early modern Europe and using that context to comment upon mothering practices in twenty-first century Australia. European and North American feminist theories have provided solid theoretical ground from which Australian feminist research has benefitted and expanded upon.

According to Samira Kawash, in her 2011 review of the development of the field of motherhood studies, feminism continued to branch off and diversify from the late 1970s; it came to include psychoanalytic theory, ecofeminism, feminist peace activism, feminist spirituality and feminist antipornography theory. Gender was seen as a difference with which

feminism was engaging to create equality in society. Many feminist theories began from the context of daughters attempting to change the world in which their mothers had distinct and limited roles. Although the focus of feminist writing at this time was womanhood without motherhood, there were several prominent texts that emerged beyond the 1970s which encouraged new ways of negotiating the "problem" (DiQuinzio 61) of motherhood by grappling with essential notions of woman and mother.

The Essential Mother

A discussion of the relationship between feminist thought and the problematic incorporation of motherhood begins with the concept of essentialism. Patrice DiQuinzio, in her 1999 text *The Impossibility of Motherhood,* offers an erudite summary of the critical aspects of essentialism regarding mothers:

> According to essential motherhood, mothering is a function of women's essentially female nature, women's biological reproductive capacities, and/or human evolutionary development. Essential motherhood construes women's motherhood as natural and inevitable. (xiii)

DiQuinzio explains that when women are seen to exist as potential or future mothers, societies very easily build upon these key assumptions with yet more assumptions about what all women seek in the future and how they find fulfilment within their feminine identity. The assumption about women then becomes that:

> psychological and emotional capacities are natural in women, women's desires are oriented to mothering and women's psychological development and emotional satisfaction require mothering. (xiii)

The assumptions of essentialism also dictate that the focus of women's sexual expression in relation to their biological capacity should be to produce children. DiQuinzio puts forward the belief that sexuality, femininity and motherhood are interconnected strands of a woman's identity when viewed from the perspective of essentialism. She writes that:

> Essential motherhood dictates that all women want to be and should be mothers and clearly implies that women who do not manifest the qualities required by mothering and/or refuse mothering are deviant or deficient as women. Essential motherhood is not only an account of mothering, but also an account of femininity. (xiii)

As will be demonstrated in my analysis of fiction in the following chapters, each of the mother characters examined in the chapters on the representation of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding wrestle with some aspect of DiQuinzio's description of essential motherhood, which is a very apt description of the attributes of the angel of the house. The historical process from which modern wifehood and motherhood evolved, as described by Bueskens, seems to have cemented ideals of what a woman and a mother is and given the figure of the mother a fixed essence. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to attempt to solve the theoretical dilemmas posed by essentialism and its nexus within various strands of feminist thought, nonetheless the assumptions about what mothers are supposed to do and how they are supposed to behave are embedded in the attitudes of characters presented in the selected fiction.

The division of the thesis chapters into three chronological, biological stages of maternity is deliberate. Each chapter explores the physical and emotional terrain encountered by characters experiencing motherhood for the first time. These characters enter an intense and intimate stage of waiting for their child to be born, birthing their child and then nourishing that child from their own bodies. Their bodies take on new meanings and new work within the narratives. Some of the characters embrace some aspects of essential

motherhood: yearning for a child; deep engagement and attunement to the needs of their infant; a value placed on sacrifice; the satisfaction of a bond with their baby; and the detachment from sexual pleasure. However, many of the characters depicted in the novels, particularly in the pregnancy chapter, show essential motherhood as a false paradigm. For these characters, new motherhood feels detached and unnatural, a false pretence that hides the real woman beneath.

DiQuinzio noted two key "strategies" (62) in *The Impossibility of Mothering* that feminists used to discuss motherhood, both avoiding an essentialist view of the mother. While she acknowledges the theoretical work achieved across both strategies to form a theory of motherhood that does not rely on an essential vision of mothers, there have been limitations to the views of mother posed by some of the most well-regarded feminist theorists of the 1960s and 1970s when the women's movement was at its height in North America (61). DiQuinzio cites Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) and Mary Daly's 1978 text *Gyn/Ecology* are examples of the first strategy where motherhood was either avoided or side-lined by "minimizing the significance of mothering in women's lives or by analysing mothering in overly simplistic, one-dimensional terms" (62). DiQuinzio argues that Friedan, Firestone and Daly failed to see the possibilities of mothering beyond the limits of the intense dependence and responsibility placed upon mothers by the needs of their children within nuclear family structures. While she acknowledges that the theories underpinning these three texts are different, the similarity is in being unable to register motherhood outside of the framework of Western "individualism" (63). By pitting the individual against the mother with dependent children, motherhood will always appear as a serious loss of autonomy and subjectivity, as noted by Bueskens as well. "The dilemma of difference" (62) is the second strategy DiQuinzio notes in her text. This strategy considers women's experiences of both mind and body, and the

embodied work of mothering. Jane Gallop, Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick and French feminists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva produced key texts that engaged with the concepts of difference, the female body and the physical, intellectual and emotional work of mothering. While each strategy has offered and continues to offer important contributions to the wide field of feminist theory, DiQuinzio's text interrogates the tensions between differing feminist thought about mothers, their work and their struggles in the wider feminist goal of equality. She sums up the crucial impediment to a unified feminist theory: "motherhood is impossible: it is impossible for feminist theory to avoid the issue of motherhood and it is impossible for feminist theory to resolve it" (DiQuinzio xx). While it could be argued that feminist theory is still working to resolve its alliance with motherhood, new texts from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s negotiating the terrain between feminist autonomy and the embodied care work of mothers developed into the sub-discipline of motherhood studies.

Hélène Cixous' work explores the embodied psychoanalytic meanings of the mother to call for a new era of women's writing. Her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" seeks women to write in and through their bodies, as "in body" (886) has been the way women have experienced oppression and social change for generations. "We've been turned away from our bodies . . . so few women have as yet won their body back" (886). Cixous seeks a specifically embodied practice of feminine writing to bring about social change, to allow women to speak where they have been silenced. Present in both her theoretical and fictional writing such as *Breaths* (Cixous, Sellers 49-54) is the figure of the pregnant mother as a symbol of the precipice of change that comes out of a history of the oppressed feminine. My use of the term embodied in this thesis recognises the layers of cultural and symbolic meaning on the physical body of the mother in fiction to transmit ideas about womanhood, motherhood, individuality and the relationship between mother and others. The experience of

new motherhood, for the characters examined in the fiction, is tied up with their bodily experiences. The body becomes a way of recognising the initial impact of motherhood on their life and the stark contrast that it often presents between their previous life as childless women and this new stage.

My analysis of the texts presented in this thesis does rely on an understanding of "the dilemma of difference" (DiQuinzio 62). For these mother figures, the maternal experience is both body and mind. In the pregnancy and postpartum chapter, this "difference" of living maternity through the body comes into conflict with precisely the "individualism" (63) that DiQuinzio notes in her first strategy, where feminist writers side-lined the experience of motherhood in order to strive for the potential of full individualism. The mother characters in these novels experience a disconnect between the physical experience of maternity that amplifies their experience of difference and their mind, which attempts to continue to see the world through the individual and autonomous self. The characters presented in the chapters on childbirth and breastfeeding, however, portray a more synonymous embodiment of difference. These mother figures experience their motherhood through a deeper synergy between mind and body. In the novels, childbirth is the culmination of a uniquely feminine experience, highlighted by the focus on female birth attendants, the interior space of the home and the distance in understanding between many of the mothers and their male partners or doctors. Childbirth can be read as an expression of the wisdom found in the power of the female body and the achievement of feminine maturity. Likewise, in the chapter on breastfeeding, lactating breasts are an expression of a mother's care and investment in a physical and emotional bond with her child. The act of breastfeeding is a continuation of the nurturance begun in pregnancy, and it is experienced by these characters as a quality that is distinctly feminine and related to an embodied experience of motherhood. These texts could be read together as reinforcing the view that there is a unique maternal and therefore feminine

experience which is often beyond the grasp of male characters. The fact that many of the manifestations of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding across these fifteen texts utilise residual images of motherhood from the Victorian era, where the status and role of mother was elevated beyond previous centuries (Dally), can account for this view of maternity as a feminine, embodied experience.

Connecting biology with femininity and "difference" (DiQuinzio 62) when discussing womanhood and motherhood leads into the theoretical dilemma of essentialism, as outlined by DiQuinzio. However, post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak spoke of the concept of strategic essentialism as a temporary means to gather women under one term in order to bring about positive political change. When asked about her ideas of "universal oppression of women under patriarchy", Spivak replied that in regard to the question of universality, "there was a sort of strategic choice" (Spivak 183). She expanded on this by claiming that:

> a universal solution was being looked for and since I believe that one shouldn't throw things but use them, strategically I suggested that perhaps rather than woman inhabiting the spaces of absence, perhaps here was an item which could be used as a universal signifier (183).

Spivak's reference to an item is later expanded upon to become a concept of strategic essentialism. In discussing her use of the literal and symbolic clitoridectomy to represent a universal concern about women's treatment, Spivak explains: "I should see what in the universalising discourse could be useful and then go on to see where that discourse meets its limits and its challenges within that field. I think we have to choose again strategically, not universal discourse but essentialist discourse . . . I must say I am an essentialist from time to time" (183). Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism is useful to consider here, to theorise the embodied experiences of the characters depicted in the fiction.

It is critical to acknowledge the essentialist presentation of characters before analysing the ways in which these characters operate within the narratives, and what the narratives are portraying about motherhood more generally. The characterisation of mothers in these novels does rely on essential notions of the birth mother as the obvious primary carer due to their biological capabilities. These novels also hold a sense of the obligations of women to become responsible mothers. The pregnancy and postpartum chapter outlines the fatal consequences for mothers who do not fulfil their duty as wives and mothers. Perhaps the most marked example of this is Fiona Higgins' *The Mothers' Group,* where a lapse in maternal supervision leads to a toddler's drowning death. The childbirth chapter draws awareness to the heroism of childbirth, outlined in feminine terms. Breastfeeding in fiction highlights the nurturing and salvific role of breastmilk as a form of maternal care and reciprocal bond. These three chapters offer examples of fiction that invest heavily in the notion that motherhood begins with an embodied experience unique to the feminine sex and requires the ongoing physical presence and emotional work of the mother as mature female. By not acknowledging the essentialist position from which these characters may have originated is to hold our understanding of maternity in literature in "the spaces of absence" in Spivak's terms (183). If the essential perspective is not acknowledged, then the character of the mother may remain silent in the literature.

Literature on the maternal is concerned with women's relationships with their bodies and the reproductive process and its impact both physically and psychically. Although it may have an essentialist origin, close reading and literary analysis will allow the meanings embedded in this view to come to the fore, to understand the concerns about the maternal being portrayed through the embodied experience. These meanings can then be understood within a wider context of how dominant this essentialist vision of the mother is in literature, or else how it may manifest as residual understandings of the role and work of motherhood.

Emergent representations of the maternal body may explore possibilities beyond the essentialist view of the relationship between femininity and motherhood.

The Development of Maternal Studies

Of Woman Born was credited by motherhood studies scholars as being the first text that argued for feminists to re-consider motherhood. American poet and intellectual Adrienne Rich published her 1976 text exploring motherhood as both a patriarchal institution and a personal experience. In this text, Adrienne Rich looks back over her experience of mothering three children and poses a series of examinations into motherhood as it is experienced in patriarchy. She writes of:

> two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. (Rich 15)

The first part of the book critiques the concept of motherhood as naturally fulfilling all an adult woman's desires. In the remaining chapters, Rich examines the complexities that patriarchy brings to mother-child relationships. According to Rich, Western society has been influenced by Freudian theories of castration fear, penis envy and the Oedipus complex, which colour how mothers are seen to behave towards their children and how mothers feel they should behave. Society has proved quick to blame a mother for children who seem to go astray, and guilt is a predominant feature of modern mothering. The use of the term motherhood to distinguish raising children within the confines of a patriarchal structure has been overlaid with numerous connotations and expansions since the development of maternal studies and Rich's text. I use the term motherhood in this thesis not simply to denote a

patriarchal structure, but as a multivalent term with varied manifestations that can be reflected and critiqued within literature.

In her conclusion, Rich calls for women to try to think outside the patriarchal order, to "think through the body" (290) and to repossess our bodies. This will, she argues, alter women's thinking and allow mothers to think of new opportunities for true freedom and equality. Rich's text brought to the foreground several concerns for feminist and maternal theory and advocacy: a need to break through the myth that intensive motherhood and intensive mothering is the natural order of things, a desire for women to look beyond the confines of patriarchal structures to alternative forms of living and experiencing, and the critique of contemporary birth experiences as a platform for positive social change. Rich poses a model of embodiment that is an alternative to essentialist views of mothering, a view which is manifested in some of the texts examined in the upcoming chapters that explore the sexual desires of mothers, the importance of mothering within a community of mothers, and the critique of medical models of care for women in childbirth.

Published almost a decade later, in 1989, was Sara Ruddick's vastly different *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*. Despite its focus on philosophy rather than feminist activism, Ruddick's text became instrumental in providing a lexicon for the work of mothering. The text reflected on the physical, emotional and intellectual experience of new motherhood and the neglect of this life experience in the philosophical canon. Her text views the experience of motherhood from a philosophical perspective that respects both the mind and the body as two cohesive parts of a whole, rather than separated entities as in Cartesian or similar dualist philosophies. First, Ruddick looks at what constitutes maternal practice. She defines a mother as an adult male or female who takes:

> upon oneself the responsibility of childcare, making its work a regular and substantial part of one's working life . . . they are "mothers" just because and to the degree that they are committed to meeting demands that define maternal work. (17)

Mostly, these demands are influenced by the culture in which the mother brings up her/his children, deeming which behaviours and values are acceptable and should be nurtured in a child.

Maternal practice involves meeting the basic demands of a child in three main areas: preservation, growth and social acceptance. Preservation involves the protective care of children until they are old enough to be independent. For example, adequate and nutritious food, shelter, clothing and stimulation provide for the normal development of a child. Growth requires that the child's intellect and emotion be nurtured in ways that are acceptable to that child's culture. The third practice involves the mother training the child to be socially acceptable. Training requires reflection of the mother's "own moral principles" (105). This training can include self-questioning and reflective thinking on the part of the mother. It requires mothers to balance their power in order to teach, guide and instruct a developing person who has their own growing ideas about the world.

When mothers reflect on their practices, Ruddick calls this "maternal thinking" (13) and she compares it to the thinking and critique about practices that occurs in all disciplines. The purpose of maternal thinking is to analyse the practice against the overall aims and goals of preservation, growth and social acceptance to see what strategies are needed or need to be changed, to be able to make judgements about success or weaknesses. When mothers meet and are thinking aloud together, they are discussing the virtues and struggles of their work. Ruddick's text was hailed for its ground-breaking work on defining mothering practice. It provides a framework for my discussion of the maternal thinking present in the practice of breastfeeding in Chapter 4.

A change of direction occurred in 1990s feminist thought, following the influence of the poststructuralist movement. From a feminism founded on difference and identity to one that now explored poststructuralist concepts of gender and power, the deconstruction of woman and gender formed new theories, such as the performativity of gender, as described in Judith Butler's 1990 book, *Gender Trouble*. Theories of difference feminism were now seen as contributing to the essentialisation of women and mothers, limiting them according to their biological traits. Feminist critique of the 1990s sought to destabilise normative notions of gender and explore new possibilities (Kawash 970). Yet again, key texts published during this time reminded the wider feminist community that the problematic discourse of motherhood was yet to be fully explored and explained within the field of feminist studies, despite the ground laid by Rich and Ruddick.

The publication of new texts acknowledged that feminism and motherhood remained rich terrain for scholarly work to interrogate. African American academic writing on motherhood further expanded debates about the values of motherhood to different cultures and the impact of racism and class on maternal experience (hooks, Lorde, Hill Collins). Several key texts and review essays of this period included Lauri Umansky's *Motherhood Reconceived* (1996), which is a history of feminism and motherhood. Also published at this time was Sharon Hays' *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), which analysed the intensive mothering and ideologies that lay behind contemporary expectations of motherhood. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society'*s 1995 issue had a special review section on motherhood. According to editors Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres and Barbara Laslett, scholarship on motherhood is "a subject that has been, and continues to be, a central problematic in feminist thinking" (395). This theoretical challenge is also the focus of "Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading" by Ann Snitow (1992). Snitow discussed how feminist writing from the US was always concerned with motherhood from

the mid-1960s, yet the main problem of motherhood in feminism in the mid-1990s was twofold: first, the articulation of a theoretical place in current feminist discussion for the deliberately child-free woman; and second, to clarify the specific importance feminism was placing on motherhood. These two concerns of Snitow are still points of discussion for scholars in this field, and the question regarding the importance of motherhood is one that is still unfolding. For Rozsika Parker, this contested terrain between feminism and motherhood is part of the package of what she terms "Maternal Studies" (1). Its importance and contribution:

> involves identifying and analysing such dissonances and disjunctures between the lived experiences of mothering within different cultural contexts, and the contradictory ideals that mediate mothering. This is the framework within which maternal identities are forged. (Parker, "Why Study the Maternal" 3)

The dialogue between feminism and motherhood continued until a shift in the early 2000s to seeing the study of motherhood as a discipline in its own right, with an ongoing relationship to feminist projects.

The Emergence of Motherhood Studies as a Distinct Discipline

Canadian scholar Andrea O'Reilly coined the term 'motherhood studies' in 2006 "to acknowledge and demarcate this new scholarship on motherhood as a legitimate and distinctive discipline" *(Twenty-First Century Motherhood* 1). She based her terms on the foundations of maternal critique that Rich had begun with *Of Woman Born,* as well as the theories of Sara Ruddick and Patricia Hill Collins. In 1998, O'Reilly founded the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement out of York University in Toronto. Alongside this was the establishment of the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* and Demeter Press, a feminist press for creative and scholarly texts on motherhood and

mothering. O'Reilly's key concern is that motherhood studies continue to evolve. In her 2010 book, *Twenty-First Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*, O'Reilly writes, "in the thirty plus years since the publication of Rich's *Of Woman Born*, motherhood research has focused upon the oppressive and empowering dimensions of mothering and the complex relationship between the two" (2). Since then, motherhood studies has been divided into the following overlapping categories: First, motherhood as institution, whereby scholars investigate policies, laws, images and patriarchal ideologies. The second category is the lived experience of motherhood and the scholarly examination of the actual work of mothering, inspired by Ruddick's ideas about maternal practice. Motherhood as identity or subjectivity forms the third category, investigating a woman's understanding of selfhood when she becomes a mother and how it relates to both institution and experience. A new theme of agency has also been of interest to feminist scholars in motherhood studies since around 2000. This theme views motherhood in a more positive light, focusing on how mothering and motherhood can be empowering and can offer potential for change (1-3).

O'Reilly defines "motherhood" as the patriarchal institution, and "mothering" as a lived experience (2), complementing the framework set out initially by Rich. O'Reilly also offers the following political distinction: "In contrast to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, an empowered practice of mothering is one modelled upon maternal agency" (14). O'Reilly has sought to develop a discourse on the maternal that promotes social change through awareness and activism, as well as critically examining which social obstacles remain in place for mothers in the twenty-first century. For O'Reilly, a distinct feminism for mothers, what she termed "matricentric feminism" offers a way through the "unfinished business of feminism" (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 2). This specific, mother-centred and contemporary form of feminism seeks to address the problematic bridging between twenty-first-century feminist thought, social structures and the actual needs of mothers to

realise their agency. In acknowledging the ongoing negotiation between motherhood and feminism through the development of matricentric feminism, I use the term motherhood in my thesis to draw out the multivalent elements of the term. The patriarchal manifestations of motherhood come under critique in the analytical chapters on pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding while fostering emergent developments in the field of literary studies on the maternal. Complementing this critical study of motherhood and its interdisciplinary manifestations is *Studies in the Maternal*, a journal that began in 2009 out of the scholarly network known as MaMSIE (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities Identities and Ethics) based in the United Kingdom.

Alongside scholarly critique of motherhood and mothering, journalists and writers have been setting down their firsthand experiences in memoir form. These motherhood memoirs follow the personal journeys of their authors through pregnancy, childbirth and into the first year of mothering. Memoir that combines social research include Susan Mushart's *The Mask of Motherhood* (1997) and Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions* (2002). Among the commonalities of these motherhood memoirs is a deep frustration at the lack of confidence and knowledge about parenting and mothering skills among their generation. The women explore their feelings, critiques and misgivings about the challenges and effects of second-wave feminism, the rise in medicalised models of birth and antenatal care and the challenges of breastfeeding in a society that deems breasts as sexual objects. They also investigate the rise in post-natal depression and social isolation experienced by many young mothers as a result of what Adrienne Rich describes as post-industrial revolution "intensive mothering" (31). The "mask of motherhood" is a serene front that women put on in front of other women and in front of the community that shows we are coping with the demands of a postfeminist motherhood (Maushart 314). Maushart insists the reality is a code of silence among women.

Mothers-to-be are not told of the reality of motherhood and of the struggle to balance the legacy of feminism with the logistical and unchangeable demands of a young family.

The focus on family life and balance was part of Samira Kawash's 2011 survey of twenty-first-century literature on motherhood and mothering. Kawash argued that many of the popular texts in the first decade of this century investigated the common belief that motherhood for the current generation was all about choice. The reality that these texts described was that choice was available based on a woman's age, race, income and educational levels. Texts included Judith Warner's *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (2005) and Ann Crittenden's *The Price of Motherhood* (2001), which Kawash credited with being "the book most frequently cited as the founding text of the new mother's movement" (970). The balance of work and family life, and neo-liberalism's effect on mothering, have been the subject of much work in the last two decades. Texts such as *Motherhood: How Should we Care for our Children?* by Anne Manne (2005) and *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking: Feminism, Memory and Care* by Julie Stephens (2012), in particular, draw on examples of neo-liberal mothering experiences outside of North America and are specific to an Australian cultural understanding of feminism and childcare. Kawash concludes her survey with the statement that "motherhood studies today is where feminist studies was in the 1970s, uniquely poised to have a transformative effect in a broader social context but also under siege and at risk of diminishing into divided encampments" (970). A decade on from Kawash's survey, the field of motherhood studies has seen continued growth and new publications. Among the notable texts are Andrea O'Reilly's *Matricentric Feminism* and *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*. The second edition of *Matricentric Feminism* was published in 2021. While foregrounding the need for a feminism specifically for mothers as women and the care work in which they engage, the text acknowledges gender-fluid parenting and the new paradigms this might present to the

development of the field of motherhood studies. Andrea O'Reilly's second edition of *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* brings together key theoretical concepts in the field of motherhood studies since her first publication on this topic in 1998.

O'Reilly acknowledges the wealth and breadth of this field, sometimes working within feminist studies, and at other times bring a nuanced approach to the social sciences and within the arts. She categorises maternal theory into three key "perspectives": "motherhood as experience/role, motherhood as institution/ideology and motherhood as identity/subjectivity" (O'Reilly *Maternal Theory* 12). Of those theories mentioned in *Maternal Theory*, Patrice DiQuinzio's explanation of the problems of essentialism have assisted me to situate the representation of mother characters in the fiction, while Bueskens' discussion of the role of wife and mother has developed the introduction of this thesis. Megan Rogers' work on narratology has developed the ideas in the pregnancy chapter and Sara Ruddick's "maternal thinking" (Ruddick 40) has proven useful to understanding the characters of breastfeeding mothers in fiction. In 2021, O'Reilly set out new avenues to motherhood studies which broaden the theoretical horizons of previous work. She considers gender-fluid and non-binary parenting, mothering in the digital age, mothering in a pandemic and the further development of her own theory of matricentric feminism. These are key inclusions to the field beyond 2021.

Practicing Maternity

While academics have debated the theoretical intersection of feminism and motherhood and its potential problems and possibilities, there has been a large group of scholars and activists who work on grassroots projects to enhance the experience and outcome of maternity for women. While these projects ultimately work to inform healthcare and government policy and not literary representations of motherhood, they form an important consideration for this

thesis. These projects and the research behind the advocacy illuminate current concerns about maternity in Western culture and aspects of discontent in the twenty-first century. My reading into the variety of projects on the practicing of maternity inform my reading and understanding of the way fiction may or may not mirror or explore these concerns. Real world advocacy uses multiple sources to generate discussion and feedback and to create change. Maternal health advocates use a wide variety of traditional print media, digital platforms, protests, boycotts, conferences, empirical evidence through interviews and statistics, and government advisory groups to name a few, to initiate positive changes. In Australia, as in other developed nations, advocacy has continued its work from the late twentieth into the twenty-first century around the following broad goals: providing women with safe, accessible, and woman-centred medical care during pregnancy and birth; promoting and maintaining high rates of breastfeeding among mothers of infants under two years of age; and providing postpartum care for both the infant and the mother.

Among the key texts that advocate for woman-centred care and autonomy during pregnancy and childbirth include numerous titles by British social anthropologist Sheila Kitzinger, whose book *Birth Crisis*, published in 2006, focuses on contemporary birthing challenges to natural birth in Western hospital settings. Kitzinger discusses the use of unnecessary intervention by obstetricians and the post-traumatic stress disorder many mothers face, undiagnosed, after the birth because of such interventions. *Birth Crisis* discusses how post-birth trauma can be healed and what modern maternity hospitals must do to change the outcomes for mothers. American writer Robbie Davis-Floyd, also an anthropologist specialising in childbirth, reiterates many of Kitzinger's concerns, discussing the individual birthing woman and her disempowerment by the medical model of care in developed nations. Davis-Floyd's work centres on the notion of "the technological model of birth" (Davis-Floyd 479); she argues that the American values around technology and

progress view the male human body in terms of "body-as-machine" and the female body as a "defective machine" (482). This model of female reproduction as machinery emphasises the critical importance of surveillance, examination and assistance via internal intervention in order to achieve the outcome of childbirth. Issues around safety, threat and male-dominated medical models of childbirth from advocates such as Kitzinger and Davis-Floyd have helped to draw out my reading of fiction depicting childbirth to identify similar concerns within literary narratives. While these scholars have identified such themes based on research within medical models of maternity care, they are useful markers of hegemonic cultural understandings of childbirth. These issues of safety and threat are present in the fiction discussed in Chapter 3 on childbirth.

Emphasising some of these concerns in an Australian medical context is *The Birth Wars* (2009) by Australian journalist Mary-Rose MacColl, who assisted with the review of maternity services in the state of Queensland in 2004. This book is based on her findings and is aimed to help pregnant women as consumers navigate the potential conflicts between woman- and midwife-centred natural birthing processes and the processes of intervention in hospital settings. She focuses on what is missing in the hospital system and how the knowledge and advocacy from midwives can help mothers create positive birth experiences. Another key Australian text is Kerreen Reiger's *Our Bodies, Our Babies* (2001) which offers a historical account of the childbirth and breastfeeding movement in Australia. From the perspective of both consumer and health practitioner, Dr Sarah J Buckley's text *Gentle Birth, Gentle Mothering* (2006) presents a research-focused emphasis on the benefits of natural birthing techniques compared to medication for labour and childbirth. Buckley's text utilises her medical knowledge as a family doctor alongside her experiences homebirthing her own children to give an account of the relationship between natural birth options and the care provided by the Australian hospital system. While the writings of Kitzinger and Davis-Floyd

point to the concept of childbirth as system and focus on the dominant model of the hospital across the US and the UK, MacColl, Reiger and Buckley's texts provide insight into how the hospital system in Australia has been navigated by the relationship between consumer and government, along with the options for women as consumers of care within a medical system.

While Reiger's *Our Bodies, Our Babies* detailed the work of advocacy groups to increase support for breastfeeding women during the 1970s and 1980s in Australia, there have been a number of international texts, both scholarly and for a broader audience, which delve into the underpinning concepts of the eroticisation of breasts in Western culture contrasted with the way breastfeeding mothers and breastfeeding advocates view the maternal breast in relation to infant nutrition and the mother-child bond. Brigid McConville's *Mixed Messages: Our Breasts in Our Lives*, published in 1994, is a reflection on the relationship between British culture and the objectification of the female breast. The text is based on interviews with women who are breastfeeding mothers or receiving treatment for breast cancer. In respect to breastfeeding she writes, "A woman's choice to use her breasts for feeding can trigger enormous conflicts. Suddenly the breast as sex symbol is challenged by the breast as baby-feeder" (McConville 69). Alison Bartlett's *Breastwork* (2005) details some of the changes associated with second-wave feminism that brought breastfeeding out of the private sphere of the home into the public domain. This shift has led to the "conflicts" McConville (69) also found in her research, between breastfeeding mothers who wish to move freely in public and the public discourse of the sexualised breast and its ambivalent maternal meanings. Linda Blum's *At The Breast: Ideologies of Breastfeeding and Motherhood in the Contemporary United States* (1999) reiterates McConville and Bartlett's arguments on the dichotomy between the sexual and maternal when it comes to public breastfeeding, as well as the inconsistent support for breastfeeding and extended breastfeeding (breastfeeding an infant beyond their first twelve months) from male partners.

While Blum's text is focused on breastfeeding attitudes in the US, there are many similarities between what writers have found in Australia, the UK and the US about public attitudes to breastfeeding mothers and the role of the breast in contemporary society.

Outside of scholarly texts, the World Health Organisation's recommendations for maternity care and infant care is often the overarching guideline for maternity advocacy groups and healthcare providers, particularly in Australia. Of these advocacy groups, two of the largest are the Australian Breastfeeding Association and Maternity Choices Australia (formerly the Maternity Coalition) who work with government, healthcare providers and consumers to provide access to resources and information regarding pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and the postpartum period (Sweet 139-40). While these global recommendations and local support groups produce texts that are outside the scope of the literary arts, they form an important underpinning to the broader field of maternal studies and its discourses, which impact literary representations of the maternal body and the embodied experience of motherhood. The role of the breastfeeding mother, the treatment of mothers in childbirth and the way that mothers interact with caregivers and health professionals, appear in the fiction discussed in the following chapters as a reflection of cultural concerns about the treatment of mothers.

The literary manifestation of the maternal body in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century fiction foregrounds cultural concerns about the surveillance, treatment and judgement of the mother and the physical work of the maternal body. These ideas appear in the fiction alongside other considerations present in the feminist discourse of the late twentieth century, which centre on the struggle between feminist ideals and the lived experience of mothers. Fiction has become a place of textual embodiment, giving voice by way of creative narrative, to the multiple discourses and concerns regarding the figure of the mother and the work of her body. While in some cases, fiction analysed in the following

chapters may replicate or mirror cultural concerns about motherhood, there are also examples of writers taking a more critical and creative approach to the problematic maternal body. In these instances, fiction becomes a way to broaden the field of motherhood studies with new approaches.

The three over-arching frameworks of writing maternity, theorising maternity and practicing maternity inform the following chapters that provide a close reading and analysis of fifteen fictional texts. These three frameworks provide a comprehensive social context for the ways in which the maternal body has been read, written about, understood and advocated for. It is within this social context that I read the maternal body in the following fiction, articulating the existence of dominant, residual and emergent qualities in each.

CHAPTER 2 "MOTHERHOOD AS LOSS": PREGNANCY AND THE POSTPARTUM PERIOD

"When a woman becomes a mother, one thing she loses—and usually doesn't anticipate losing—is her freedom" (Bueskens 302). This loss of freedom at a time of tumultuous change appears as a common theme in the novels examined in this chapter. Coupled with this loss and change is the often-surprising aspect for new mothers of the reality of life within the confines of the home and a dependent infant. The mothers in the five novels discussed in this chapter experience the transition from womanhood to motherhood as an extreme form of loss. Their loss is not counted in the singular; it forms a multi-layered understanding of loss in terms of past womanhood and future motherhood that is bound up in the role of wife. While the concept of loss in Bueskens' research is formed in terms of work, lifestyle constraint and inhibited freedom to participate in public life, the characters in the fiction presented here experience loss not just on those terms but also the loss of self-identity, sexual freedom and sanity. What is represented in the fiction could be described as an amplified version of the loss that has been found in empirical research with mothers. This empirical research has also noted a wide-ranging series of concerns about the contemporary disadvantages that women find themselves contending with in the journey towards motherhood.

Julie Stephens points to the advantages of literary research into the motherhood experience alongside that of empirical research, in order to give a more comprehensive picture of the attitudes towards motherhood that young women have and the wider attitudes of society. In "Beyond Binaries in Motherhood Research", Stephens writes of the need for multi-disciplinary methods of scholarly investigations of motherhood that capture the experience of mothers in more than one "voice" (92). Stephens argues the social sciences have for too long relied heavily on focus groups, direct observations and interviews to ascertain the lived experiences of mothers in a particular socio-economic group or time

period. The result is a focus on the binary between caring responsibilities and the paid workforce for mothers of the middle class, or, in Stephens' terms, the "new capitalist mother" (89) balancing family and career. This tension has created "the consistent representations of motherhood as loss" (91). The notion of loss focuses on what is absent and problematic about mothering children in a capitalist society, creating "a palpable cultural anxiety around the experience of motherhood" (90). Stephens calls for other research methods to inform maternal studies in order to reclaim other ways of understanding motherhood and the physical and emotional work of mothering. In particular, she writes that "fiction may offer possibilities that complement conventional social science" (92). This interdisciplinary engagement with fictional stories of mothers would lead to a place where "alternative versions of motherhood can therefore emerge" (92). Stephens is clear that no means of social inquiry is "beyond ideology" (92), not even fiction, but the possibilities that arise from new interpretations framed by different disciplines "may enlarge our perspectives so that it is possible to see in research the potential for more expansive forms of social engagement" (93). While fieldwork may garner certain "perspectives" (93) that may help inform social policy, literary analysis offers the opportunity for a wider engagement with the maternal and its multiple meanings and interpretations.

Using Raymond Williams' cultural materialism as an analytical framework, as outlined in the introductory chapter of the thesis, literature enables cultural references to be explored and traced. Repeated themes or concerns in novels on the maternal experience point to a wider cultural discomfort about motherhood as loss. This may not directly inform any particular social policy, as is the aim of empirical research, but it encourages the continuation of a critical discourse around the problematic aspects of the maternal body and the meanings of motherhood that currently hold cultural dominance. The aim of literary analysis is to explore how texts operate, what informs them and how readers respond. The "perspectives"

(Stephens, “Beyond Binaries” 93) gained by a literary analysis of the maternal offer new insights complementary to more structured, qualitative methods such as interviews and observations. This is due to literature’s capacity to reach large international and multi-generational audiences for as long as the books remain in print or digital form.

The aim of this chapter, and those that follow, is to apply the methods of close literary analysis to fictional narratives of motherhood in order to expand the current discourses on mothers found in the varied disciplines that maternal studies encompass. The five novels selected for examination in this chapter portray a deep engagement with the “loss” noted in Stephens’ summary of research (91) as depicted in the pregnancy and postpartum period. Impending motherhood is represented in these texts as a journey fraught with anxiety and repressed desires.

This chapter utilises Raymond Williams’ analytical triad of dominant, residual and emergent to explore aspects of old and new representations of pregnancy and early motherhood in the novels selected for examination. Archaic representations of maternity portray wifehood and motherhood as inevitable life stages for women that are interdependent. As will be demonstrated by my engagement with the ideas of Megan Rogers, women who transgress these roles in literature prior to the twentieth century were written out of the plot by suicide or madness. However, the importance of wifehood and motherhood would become socially challenged with the advent of early second-wave feminist discourse. A prevailing form of motherhood was put forward by feminist writers that understood it as a patriarchal institution (Rich, de Beauvoir) that oppressed a woman’s freedom (Friedan). Motherhood was framed in second-wave feminist writing as a life experience constituted by loss of self and autonomy. The understandings of motherhood as multifaceted loss manifests as residual images in the novels presented in this chapter by mothers who sit in tension between their life before motherhood and their current life as married mother. The characters experience the

consequences of dominant images of transgressive female characters, while demonstrating emergent qualities in novels where mothers create new communities and identities for themselves.

The five novels selected for examination in this chapter in order of discussion are:

Blue Skies Helen Hodgman (1976)

Breath Tim Winton (2008)

The Bride Stripped Bare Nikki Gemmell (2003)

The Hand that First Held Mine Maggie O'Farrell (2010)

The Mothers' Group Fiona Higgins (2012)

These five texts were chosen because their perspective on the pregnancy and postpartum experience offers opportunity for rich analysis and contribution to wider literary scholarship on the representation of the maternal. The novels by Hodgman, Winton and Higgins are set in Australia and provide much-needed research on Australian texts and the ways in which they manifest cultural understandings of the maternal body and the role of motherhood.

New motherhood in these novels places work and relationships in deep conflict with the approaching material responsibility for a vulnerable infant. Common to many of these texts is the loss of self. Philosopher Iris Marion Young helps to expand upon the source of this loss. Its origin begins in the physical changes of pregnancy: "It reveals a paradigm of bodily experience in which the transparent unity of the self dissolves" (Young 47). The physical changes of pregnancy as the months progress alongside the increasing mass of the physical body reinforce the growing sense of emotional and individual losses. Young expresses this as:

> The boundaries of my body are themselves in flux. In pregnancy I literally do not have a firm sense of where my body ends and the world begins . . . the continuity between my customary body and my body at this moment is broken. (50)

The shifting of boundaries between mother's body and the body of her infant, and the way the infant expands upon the mother's body, is a critical contributor to a mother's sense of changed identity. Young expresses this physical and emotional unease as "decentred, split, or doubled in several ways. She experiences her body as herself and not herself" (46). Not only is the mother's sense of self destabilised, but her body is read as problematic by Margrit Shildrick, who claims that "the pregnant female body itself is always a trope of immense power in that it speaks to an inherent capacity to problematize the boundaries of self and other" ("Monstering the (M)Other" 30). While the mothers represented in the fiction in Section 1 feel the shifting of boundaries not only in their physicality but in the changing nature of their emotions and their relationships, they do not appear to see the potential symbolic power of pregnancy that Shildrick speaks of, only the loss.

At times, this loss occurs when mothering is portrayed as reluctant role-playing and simply a display of culturally appropriate maternal behaviour, for example in *Blue Skies* and *The Bride Stripped Bare* (title shortened to *Bride* in this chapter). On the outside, the mothers-to-be appear to be dutiful wives, while they are simultaneously living clandestine lives centred on sexual desire and fulfilment outside of their marriages. In *The Hand that First Held Mine* (title shortened to *Hand* in this chapter), the loss of Elina's identity as an artist, triggered by the birth of a child, becomes a profound personal crisis. Across other texts in this selection, risk-taking emerges as a common theme, as the protagonists approach their remaining months of pregnancy with sexual urgency and a desire for escapism.

This chapter examines the novels in two separate sections. The first section analyses the novels *Blue Skies*, *The Bride Stripped Bare* and *Breath*. This section is underpinned by themes of sexual risk, death, loss of self and a focus on the stage of pregnancy. I argue that these three novels utilise the dominant image of the "fallen woman" (Braun 342), the sexually transgressive female common in Victorian era plots who is dead by end of the

narrative by suicidal drowning (Meessen 7-8, Nicoletti), rendered invisible to society by madness (Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction* 166), "punished" or "made to repent and marry" (Heilmann, "Fin-de-siècle [sic] feminism" 209). This selection of three texts provides important examples of fictional narratives of motherhood where sexual activity beyond pregnancy is deemed transgressive to ideals of motherhood and silenced by death or madness. What Andrea O'Reilly terms the "naturalization" and "idealization" ("Patriarchal Motherhood" 65) of motherhood, which assumes that all women experience "maternal ability . . . and that all mothers find joy and purpose in motherhood" (64), is problematised in the texts presented in this chapter by presenting motherhood as a life stage that sits uneasily with these characters and causes loss rather than joy. O'Reilly's categories critique patriarchal foundations that assume "maternity is natural to women (i.e. all women naturally know how to mother) and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence" (65). While O'Reilly recognises that naming and critiquing patriarchal structures operating within motherhood creates the possibility for change (64), Jacqueline Rose cautions against underestimating the gravity of the idealisation of mothers and its impact on women's psyche and the overall health of society. In trying to accommodate these ideals, "Mothers always fail" (Rose 27). Rose suggests in her 2018 text, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*, that what is at stake in motherhood is the incredible burden set upon mothers to bear the weight of human frailty and suffering while keeping up with the ideal of motherhood as unconditional, self-giving, all-encompassing love. This ideal, she writes, does not consider the certainty that hate will be an emotion present in all mothers as they balance their former individual life against the constraints of ideal motherhood. Mothers in Western culture are placed within a philosophical framework that idolises self-actualisation and individuality which they are called upon to abandon to meet their children's needs. As Rose notes:

> it is one of the most striking characteristics of discourse on mothering that the idealisation does not let up as the reality of the world makes the ideal harder for mothers to meet. If anything, it seems to intensify. (Rose 27)

This reality, according to Rose, is a cultural expectation placed on mothers to create a new future for their children without a proper acknowledgement of the past and the conditions with which both mothers and their children live. Women cannot carry the virtues of their entire society. They are flawed human beings with their own pain, pleasures (88) and fears. They are capable of hate (113), guilt and choice, as well as the possibility of having limited choice. The idealisation of mothers as women who sweep away the faults of history and circumstance (188) to pour unending benevolence and sacrifice upon their children is flawed and cruel to mothers (77) who value themselves against this expectation. The mothers in this chapter are caught between an ideal they may not openly acknowledge but are aware of existing, and a reality that forces the consequences of that ideal to come to the fore. When they transgress from the ideal, as they often do across the novels in this chapter, these mothers experience guilt, fury and desperation. Relationships with their families and with their infants are fraught to the point of breaking, and death emerges as an efficient form of "narrative closure" (Rogers 102) for those mothers whose transgressions are beyond the boundaries of idealised motherhood.

In *Breath* and *The Bride Stripped Bare*, pregnancy and an impending due date drive the narratives as the mothers-to-be seek risky extra-marital affairs in the lead-up to motherhood. *Blue Skies* sees the protagonist engage in a series of extra-marital affairs in the postpartum period to ward off the boredom of caring for an infant. The novels conclude with the death, permanent disappearance, or madness of the mother. These women have "fallen" (Braun 342) by failing to successfully transition to a monogamous motherhood that implies the self-denial of sexuality in favour of an all-encompassing love for an infant. These texts do

not offer "alternative versions of motherhood" (Stephens, "Beyond Binaries" 92), but rather they reiterate the idea of motherhood as a constrictive institution that reinforces a dichotomy between the sexual and the maternal. Loss manifests not only in the isolation of the individual mother but in her loss of identity, sanity and life. These narratives do not offer an alternative.

The second section of this chapter is an analysis of *The Hand that First Held Mine* and *The Mothers' Group.* These texts focus more closely on the postpartum period and are linked by their exploration of the respective protagonist's new identity as mother. I argue that these two novels are examples of what Stephens may be seeking of "alternative" (92) narratives on the maternal. Both O'Farrell's and Higgins' novels offer more than one "voice" (Stephens, "Beyond Binaries" 92) by providing multiple characters engaged in the work of new motherhood. *The Hand that First Held Mine* details the story of two new mothers: Lexie in the 1960s and Elisa who births Lexie's grandson a generation later. *The Mothers' Group* is written from the perspective of six mothers who are members of the same local mothers' group and share the first twelve months of their babies' lives, learning to be supportive of one another. The two novels do, however, utilise some dominant images of motherhood as presented in Section 1 of this chapter which explores the consequences for sexually transgressive maternal characters. Lexie, the single mother from the 1960s narrative in *The Hand that First Held Mine,* refuses to marry Felix, the father of her son, and she instead seeks love on a casual basis. Her narrative in the novel ends with her drowning and her young son, Theo, being taken to live with Felix and his new wife Margot, who pass themselves off to the three-year-old boy as his biological parents. Cara in *The Mothers' Group* loses her one-year-old daughter to an accidental drowning while she speaks to an old boyfriend in the hope of rekindling her affair and leaving her husband. However, these connections between drowning and sexual transgression play in the background to plots that choose to foreground a strong matrescence among the mothers. Matrescence was defined by Dana Raphael in 1975 as:

> the time of mother-becoming, the period when a woman changes from girl and wife to mother. During this process, this *rite de passage*, changes occur in a woman's physical state, in her status within the group, in her emotional life, in her focus of daily activity, in her own identity, and in her relationships with all those around her. (66)

Becoming a mother is a transformational process, a matrescence, deeply challenging to the characters but ultimately a process that is worthwhile. Motherhood becomes a life stage of new beginnings for these characters. While some aspects of their pre-pregnancy life have remained behind in this new life of motherhood, there is a widening sense of identity and purpose, a confidence to meet new challenges and a deepening sense of interconnectedness, not only with their infants but with those around them. It is these qualities in the fiction in section 2 that I identify to be "emergent" (Williams, "Base and Superstructure" 11).

Section 1: The "Fallen" "Eternal Madwoman": Maternity, Sex and Death

Scholarship into the representation of the pregnant woman in popular culture has revealed a tendency towards fetishisation, particularly in visual media. Jennifer Musial claims that the representation oscillates between two extremes of "the Madonna" and "the whore" (Musial 394). Popular culture produces visual and written texts across both representations, in what Musial calls a cultural "ambivalence" as to the most appropriate or appealing representation; the ambivalent representation is problematised by the inclusion of the pregnant woman as object in pornographic material and not simply as the subjects of pregnancy guides (394). The Madonna trope is associated with a white, middle-class asexuality during pregnancy, influenced by advice from the medical profession. Musial's observations about pregnancy advice books build on the findings of Huntley's research on the representation of pleasure

and the pregnant body. Huntley found that a woman's sexuality is appropriate if it is in relation to preparing for childbirth:

> Sexual pleasure and activity is legitimate if in the service of hormonal balance, muscular readiness and emotional well-being. We could say that, by implication, any sexual activity not directed at the proper maintenance of the maternal body, the unborn child and the heterosexual relationship, is unnecessary, even selfish. (Huntley 357)

The whore trope is associated with hypersexuality and pleasure outside the bounds of middle-class marriage. Musial finds that the focus in pornographic material is on male pleasure, with very little attention given to the pleasure of the pregnant woman. In contrast, the novels examined in Section 1 focus on the physical pleasure of the pregnant woman, sought out by these women through extra-marital affairs and taking on a new sense of urgency as the due date for the baby's birth draws near. The representation of these characters may be "hyper-sexual" (394), as Musial has found in visual culture, but the purpose is not only pleasure for its own sake; it is also a means to ignore or deny the looming responsibilities and structures of the maternal role. Meredith Nash refers to celebrity mothers whose persona focuses on the "sexy" attributes of their new motherhood as being "anti-mother" figures, whose outwardly sexed behaviour is a "physical subversion of cultural mores, that make women sexless "good mothers'" (Nash 38). While it could be argued that the autonomous, pleasure-seeking and uninhibited pregnant mother could be considered an emergent representation in literature on the maternal, the conclusion of each of these three novels with the death, disappearance or madness of the mother is problematic.

Megan Rogers' literary analysis has found an abundance of female characters descending into madness as "narrative closure" (102). Andrea O'Reilly has reiterated this finding in her study of two novels published in 2019 that utilise the trope of the "unreliable

narrator, whose very sanity is in question" (O'Reilly "Terror of Mothering" 265). Despite reading the novels as having the potential to "challenge normative motherhood by rendering not mothers but mothering as terrifying" (265), these novels depict the terror and anxiety of mothering while relying on the mental instability of the mother figure to drive the plot. While literature that destabilises tropes of the monstrous mothers could be read as subversive, the use of madness together with new motherhood has the capacity to undo this reading.

O'Reilly has found examples of fiction which "disrupt normative motherhood" (250) through a fictional exploration of the terrors that accompany keeping infants safe and protecting them from the world outside; however, the narratives rely on the disruption of the perception of the mothers, and their actions are read as madness by others. According to Rogers, madness is not the feminist rebellion originally praised in feminist literary criticism beginning in the 1980s but a reinforcement of women's status as passive victim without agency (Rogers 55-57). Particularly problematic are representations of women who are on the "liminal" (137) margins, unable to successfully transition into a life stage and therefore trapped in the space between their old self and their new. Rogers has explored a recurring theme beyond Victorian-era plots where women become "the eternal madwoman" (137) because they arrive at a life stage and are not able to move beyond it. A "descent" (107) into madness occurs and the plot is completed, rather than the character finding a viable solution to their social constraints. They do not move beyond into any redemption or acknowledgment or celebration stage (136), the way typical quest narratives that involve a male protagonist would (73). This creates a "liminal stage, participants stand at the threshold between their previous way of structuring their identity and a new way of life" (137). The problem for Rogers is that many plots remain at this point. She terms this "narrative captivity" (153).

The following three novels demonstrate the problematic aspects of mothers meeting their narrative end through suicide or madness, and I explore the ways each text represents motherhood as loss of identity and loss of sanity.

Blue Skies Helen Hodgman (1976)[2]

Blue Skies was Helen Hodgman's debut novel of 1976: a first-person depiction of a nameless, young, isolated mother in her home during a scorching summer in a coastal suburb of Hobart. The narrative utilises aspects of Tasmanian Gothic to create a disquieting atmosphere. According to Jim Davidson, features of this genre primarily depict "a landscape containing presences" (310) through the use of ghosts or spectres. Davidson's analysis of literary works utilising characteristics of Tasmanian Gothic notes that an awareness of "the slaughtered Aborigines, the downtrodden convicts and hunted species" will often be a prominent part of these narratives (310). The narrative builds towards the climactic death of a neighbour, Ollie, caused by the narrator who throws a stone object in the path of her neighbour's electric lawnmower. The text can be read as a darkly comical critique of suburban life where appearances are deceiving. Extending this reading further, we can see a more disturbing portrait of a young woman in crisis, unable to reconcile the life of "unencumbered" woman (Chandler 272) and married mother. She is read in this analysis as a series of absences, an erased figure with no fixed moorings on which to begin to form a maternal subjectivity. The narrator experiences an erasure of self by being unable to experience any form of successful transition from womanhood to motherhood, leaving her with no sense of purpose or subject position.

[2] The analysis of *Blue Skies* in Section 1 of this chapter features material previously published in *Hecate* 45.1 & 2, 2019. Works Cited provides full references for material in this thesis that has previously been published.

Blue Skies and its representation of the erasure of self is one of numerous literary responses in the 1970s to the discourses of second-wave feminism around identity, self, motherhood and domesticity. The novel's engagement with themes of marriage and child rearing has echoes in other writers across novels and poetry published from the mid-1950s through to the late 1970s, such as Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing. Australian authors Jessica Anderson and Helen Garner also wrote narratives exploring the attempts of young women to find a way of independent living despite rigid social roles for wives and mothers. Hodgman's narrative highlights a key question in post second-wave discussions on the potential coalescing of womanhood and motherhood: How does one begin to transition to motherhood, to gain a sense of self as maternal subject, when one's previous life as woman has placed value on individuality, freedom and sexual expression? The narrator finds her desire for these values to be incompatible with "matrescence" (Raphael 66), a key transition phase and a way to begin to understand oneself as mother. Her lack of matrescence ensures that she fails to develop as a character beyond the nameless archetypal young wife and mother. She firstly fails to become a faithful and therefore successful wife, then fails in the expected transition to a motherhood of nurturance, sexual sacrifice and domesticity. The narrative explores the double failure to transition to wife and mother as "the darkness of descent" (Rogers 118) into madness, from which there is no redemption. The plot ends with the young woman coherent but dangerously unstable and secretive, presenting an innocent façade to her husband and neighbours while hiding her responsibility for Ollie's death. The weight of ideal motherhood can be unbearable to the point of breaking.

The road to madness for the unnamed mother in *Blue Skies* would come as no narrative surprise to Jacqueline Rose, who contends that:

> Not being explosive will do nicely as a definition of what is mostly asked of mothers, although, as any mother will testify, explosive is what she, to her utter dismay, often

> feels [. . .] It is this demand—to be respectable and unexplosive—that I see as most likely to drive mothers, and by extension their infants, crazy. I realise, of course, that this is the opposite of how these matters are normally thought about: if a mother cannot hold things together, who can? (Rose 125-126)

While Rose's text assumes a strong love of the infant by their mothers, Hodgman's novel portrays a mother who is emotionally detached from her infant from pregnancy. Her coldness and lack of name result in a distant character, read as a mother absent from her own emotions and her own sense of identity.

Blue Skies opens with the narrator's reaction to her unexpected pregnancy, describing how she "wept" (3) upon learning of her pregnancy, and the swift culmination into a life of domestic wifehood by comparing herself to a sea turtle:

> I was stranded . . . like the poor dumb female turtle I once saw in a film. It had just laid a load of eggs in great distress and difficulty and hadn't a hope of making it back to the sea, but, exhausted, was going to die . . . We borrowed money . . . My husband worked hard [. . . to] prepare for his financial fatherhood. I sat back like the turtle and waited to die. (3-4)

Like the turtle, the narrator is nameless and without clear identifying characteristics. The text also renders her speechless in the way it positions her as isolated and passive. Her own mother is absent from the plot and there are no links to familial or cultural ties. The narrator of *Blue Skies* has no clear foundation or history for motherhood due to her lack of a matrilineal identity; her entire female line is missing. The narrator's voice is of a hesitant and emerging daughter, still seeking a clear identity and future. She recalls:

> When I found out I was pregnant and he took me home to meet his mother, it was like winning a lottery you didn't know you had tickets in. You don't know whether to laugh or cry. (39)

Her lack of confidence continues after the birth of her daughter. “Would they blame me?” (60) she wonders to herself when considering the state of her daughter sleeping outside in the heat of summer. This lack of a maternal voice was articulated by Marianne Hirsch in her 1989 text *The Mother/Daughter Plot,* surveying mothers and daughters across literary history. Hirsch found that novels of the 1970s and 1980s do explore a maternal experience as opposed to previous centuries of literature, but the viewpoint was that of the daughter and not the mother. Hodgman’s narrator is an example of the phenomenon Hirsch describes, except that in this case the voice of the motherless daughter wavers under extreme uncertainty. Hodgman’s unnamed narrator lacks any real way to experience matrescence, which would lead to an understanding of herself as a maternal subject. Her maternal identity is absent, and an emergence as a fully developed individual character is also non-existent. The narrator is presented as erased by a sequence of absences that do not provide any cultural structures for a maternal subjectivity to form. Counter to common narrative structures that show growth and increasing complexity in the development of character, Hodgman’s narrator remains nameless and misunderstood by others. Rather than maturing, she regresses into anxiety, distress and mental instability.

The most notable absence that eventually leads into madness is seen in the way daughter, mother and other such terms of relationship, are represented as archetypical of certain roles rather than as complex individuals. The narrator who tells her story in first-person remains without a name for the entirety of the plot. In this way the text becomes a literary embodiment of the archetypal suburban housewife and mother in the same way as Freidan’s voices in *The Feminine Mystique* are referred to as “a mother of four” (17), “a twenty-three-year-old mother” (19) or, more simply, “the wife” (41). This repetitive namelessness among Freidan’s interviewees becomes a key literary technique in *Blue Skies*. The narrator’s “problem that has no name” (Freidan 18) is the situation of many nameless

wives and mothers living in isolated domestic suburbia. Despite *The Feminine Mystique*'s publication twenty years prior to *Blue Skies* and clearly identifying with a white American middle class, Freidan's research on the dis-satisfaction with the role of wife and mother is echoed in Hodgman's narrative set twenty years later in an Australian context. Their current life as mother experienced by these nameless women, the narrator included, erases their past experiences of being "unencumbered" women (Chandler 272) who experienced the first decades of advocacy for equality in education, work and the public sphere. Now relegated back to the private realm of the home, these nameless women encounter the incongruity between the independent life of an individual woman and the expectations of a good mother (T. Miller) whose circle of influence and freedom has become much smaller. Without a name, one cannot be truly known, and erasure of public- and self-identity becomes a likely consequence. One can also become easily subsumed into "a role I didn't choose" (Hodgman 59) that does not carry significant meaning nor extend towards any clear subject position.

Ollie the neighbour grates on the narrator's nerves precisely because her role and her domain of influence are so small and strictly preserved. She is weighed down with seemingly trivial matters of the domestic in a way that eventually becomes a threat to the "balance of my mind" (Hodgman 152). Freidan described these emotions she saw present in young wives and mothers as "a strange stirring, a sense of discontent, a yearning" (13). Women recalled their experiences of motherhood saying, "I feel empty . . . I don't exist" (18). *Blue Skies* epitomises the frustrations found by the women Freidan interviewed, here presented through the unsettling tropes of Tasmanian Gothic. An underlying atmosphere of trauma and violence, hidden pasts, isolation, guilt, deception and a feeling of alienation are localised Australian tropes used here to articulate common experiences. Freidan observed these as emotions in the women she interviewed and articulated a theory of the erasure of public

existence and the inability to feel emotion. The natural landscape in *Blue Skies* works as a reflection of the young mother's anxieties that threaten to make their way to the surface.

The narrator's failed matrescence is set amidst a background of sun, sand and water that, despite the promise of "a holiday-brochure cover of a beach" (3), only reveals images of repressed desire and death. The narrator's desires for sexual fulfilment, genuine companionship and a way out of domestic and childrearing responsibilities seep through the landscape. Hodgman utilises some of the common aspects of the Tasmanian Gothic to unsettle the reader by creating a haunting atmosphere. *Blue Skies* uses the narrator's keen sense of connection to the coastal landscape and her simultaneous disconnection to people to heighten the sense of hidden pasts and traumas present in the community. She experiences failure to be like "All the other women" who "managed to invent something to fill their time . . . an urge to fill days acceptably. I had none" (5). Highlighting her sense of loss at being unable to live the expected life of new motherhood, she becomes keenly attuned to any sense of threat and death, maintaining an acute awareness of lost historical communities. When at the beach or forest, she is often overcome by visions, where "black women were pursued and clubbed to the sand by white men" (145) and when high up in the forest with Ben she becomes terrified by:

> a feeling of being watched . . . Narrow shapes flickered in green light between the tree trunks . . . there were no Aborigines left in this state. They were dead . . . I knew I was being watched, being willed away, by a people who no longer existed. I ran. (99-100)

The narrator's awareness of Australian colonialism's dark and hidden pasts is not the only violence of which she is aware. She is conscious of being "drawn" (34) to violence herself. At first, this is present in her fantasy of the drowning of her mother "peers" (9) at the beach. Later, her description of Thursdays with Ben contains an undercurrent of threat, as "occasionally, we would be drawn into frightened fantasies. He would twist my arms, give

me Chinese burns, whip me" (34) and this foreshadows her foray into violence and lack of self-control at the end of the novel when she succeeds in stopping Ollie's incessant lawn maintenance. Ben predicts her tendency towards violence, describing her as, "Soft at the edges, but hard as rocks somewhere in there. Very nasty" (32). In fact, the narrator takes to keeping a piece of sharp stone she calls her "weapon" (149) with her which is eventually thrown in front of Ollie's electric lawnmower, causing it to short-circuit with tragic results (152-153).

The narrator's concern with violence and hidden pasts not only haunts her via visions, but also appears in her repeated reference to hidden surfaces and a fear of rubbish. Hodgman's text is at its comedic height in these scenes of domestic absurdity. She presents sets of ironic contrasts throughout the novel. A beautiful beach is surrounded by rubbish, a dutiful husband and mother-in-law who remain naively unaware of the extra-marital affairs of a new mother, a narrator who names everyone in the narrative except herself, a friendly next-door neighbour whose obsession with a tidy front lawn literally drives the narrator mad. Nothing in *Blue Skies* is as it seems. The beach and its hidden surfaces are key examples of the persistent uncertainty the narrator feels throughout the novel, as woman, as maternal subject (Baraitser). She returns to the beach often, to escape the heat, her child, her failing marriage and her two failed extra-marital affairs. When she looks out at the beach she sees "the sea and sky, the water flushed momentarily red, as if covered with a slick of afterbirth" (Hodgman 47).

While the birth of her daughter Angelica is not mentioned in the novel, the passage suggests a traumatic experience, which the narrator feels echoed in the landscape and history around her. Smooth surfaces unsettle her, making her think of:

> terror at unknown slimy things wriggling buried in the mud-hidden nastiness, waiting to be disturbed, waiting to attack . . . staining the pretty water crimson. (75)

It is the unexpected, hidden underneath, that haunts the narrator, mirroring an anxiety about pregnancy and childbirth. A particularly comic passage can be read as a description of the outward signs of pregnancy. Soon after the birth of her daughter she develops a fear of throwing out rubbish, in case her secret life as mistress to two separate men is revealed to the neighbours. Her hoarding of rubbish in the carport gets to the point where:

> after some months of this I noticed, to my horror, that the double doors were beginning to bulge outwards. Terrified of exposure, I piled bricks in front and tried to forget all about it. (19)

Her denial of the growing reality of her pregnant body, the passivity while she "sat back . . . and waited to die" (4) is repeated in her hoarding behaviour, where surfaces threaten to spill into uncontainable situations. The fear of hidden secrets continues to haunt her with visions, as the constant lurk of violent history, claustrophobic interiors and extreme landscapes (Punter 380-387) lurks in Hodgman's use of the motifs of Tasmanian Gothic. Unable to reconcile her anxieties about wifehood and motherhood, the narrator edges closer to madness.

Blue Skies relies on absences and untold histories to maintain the characters as archetypes of woman, mother and even father, which are all revealed to be a form of deception in the text. There is an absence of communal ties reflected in the narrator's ability to see the erasure of Indigenous communities in her coastal home. The presentation of motherhood against this backdrop of violent erasure is bleak and places it at the "edge of satire" (Hill) with its use of humour and ironic contrast. The response to motherhood in *Blue Skies* not only rejects discourses of good mothering (T. Miller 338), but also results in the erasure of any stable sense of self for the narrator who cannot navigate a path to motherhood and ends up in a state of madness. The end of her two extra-marital relationships unbalances her sense of self that has always been precarious, hovering between playing along with social norms of her gender, such as marriage and family, despite her strong impulses to reject these.

The novel articulates a state of ambiguity, noted by feminists such as Betty Freidan and Simone de Beauvoir, as to the means of coalescing woman and mother into one holistic and empowered subject position. The difficulty of second-wave feminist theory to successfully negotiate the perceived binary between woman and mother eventually founded the writings of later matricentric feminism, such as the works of Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick and Andrea O'Reilly. These theorists, working across a range of disciplines in the humanities, have articulated the gaps in discourse about motherhood and its relationship to a feminism that advocates for individuality and freedom above domestic and child rearing responsibility. Matricentric feminist writing has allowed a multiplicity of voices to be heard about the ways in which womanhood and motherhood can be reconciled and negotiated, and the ways in which this can be challenging, disheartening, enriching and joyful simultaneously.

In *The Conflict: Woman and Mother,* published in 2010, Elisabeth Badinter writes of the choices available to Western women in the twenty-first century "embracing motherhood, rejecting it, or negotiating some middle ground" (7). By rejecting motherhood, Badinter is referring to a choice to remain childfree. A woman but never a mother. *Blue Skies,* representative of its late 1970s publication, problematises Badinter's three neat distinctions available to women after the second wave of feminism, by presenting a character who attempts to convince herself that motherhood is a stage of life to be expected, only to find she rejects the expectations of this lifelong role too late and cannot develop any sort of stable sense of self. Hodgman's use of a nameless female indicates a lack of stable subjectivity from the outset of the narrative, a woman who alternately sees life in contrasts "sometimes it was very funny . . . Sometimes it was very sad" (34). In Badinter's terms, the narrator has failed on the three choices supposedly made available to women: she does not know how to "embrace motherhood", she has rejected its responsibility too late, and she does not have the

means to negotiate any "middle ground" (Badinter 7). Hodgman's solution is to render the character unstable, both physically and mentally. Consistently suffocating in the heat of the house and the glare of the sun outside, her senses are too sensitively attuned to the temperature and what might lie hidden from view in the forest or under water, but not to the needs of her infant. Her daughter becomes an object of disgust and an unwanted "duty" (9), becoming in the narrator's view "the sort of thing you felt tempted to crush, but wouldn't for fear of the mess it would make" (60). Finally agreeing to her mother-in-law's encouragement to take the "little blue pills" (150), the narrative reaches an abrupt end. Ollie lies dead on her front lawn, electrified by the narrator's stone dropped into the path of the oncoming blades of Ollie's beloved new electric lawn mower. The police and her neighbours "didn't suspect a crime, and they still don't" (152). The narrator has added her own violent history to her town, and remains a wife and mother on the surface, while the "very nasty" (32) hides beneath.

Tamara Dean's interview with Helen Hodgman in 2011 touched on the author's own transition to motherhood as difficult and the novel "has echoes of Hodgman's own experience" (Dean). Hodgman is quoted as saying, "I was terribly young . . . I didn't realise at the time how hard it was. It was boredom and isolation because none of my friends had babies, so I was really alone." However, Hodgman tells Dean, that is where the similarity ends between her own transition to motherhood and that of the narrator: "She kills someone at the end of the book. This is not reality, not social conscience. It's just a novel. Anyone can relate to it" (Dean).

Blue Skies appeared in print at a time of increased social awareness of issues facing mothers and women's lack of movement in the public sphere. What triggers the narrator's downfall is the narrator's longing to be what Mielle Chandler terms "unencumbered" (Chandler 272). Tied down with a young child, the new mother feels the slow ticking of the clock and the ever-increasing summer heat as the antithesis of the womanly freedom that

Simone de Beauvoir praised in her 1949 text *The Second Sex.* Chandler's exploration of what it means to be unencumbered as a woman rests on the notion that freedom is equated with a lack of dependants, as well as autonomy and a sense of self that does not rely on interconnectedness with others. Mothers are automatically ineligible for this freedom under these terms.

Chandler poses a critique of de Beauvoir's ideals for women, based on the notion that freedom is understood in terms of individuality and does not consider connections of love and dependence between people that enhance their experience of living. According to Chandler, de Beauvoir places individualism and the "unencumbered" self (Chandler 272) at the forefront of her argument for women's equality. This, according to Chandler, does not leave room for mothers to experience freedom and a valued sense of identity if they strongly identify as both woman and mother, an intertwined, complex and yet complete identity. *Blue Skies* echoes de Beauvoir's position that the role of wife and mother is a source of erasure, as it is incompatible with the notion of an authentically free and autonomous woman. In de Beauvoir's estimation, potential is crushingly short in a woman's life:

> She is mistress of her home at twenty, linked from then on to one man, a child in her arms, now her life is finished forever. Real activity, real work are the privilege of man: her only occupations are sometimes exhausting but never fulfil her.
>
> (de Beauvoir 532)

Jonathan and Ben, the men who give the narrator the "pulse-racing secrecy" which "did a lot for me" (12) are only temporary; soon "boredom" (36) overcomes her. She never feels any lasting satisfaction beyond the physical. While escape from boredom, responsibility and family is an option for her lovers, the narrator continues to roleplay wife and mother despite mounting evidence that her attempts are failing dismally. Her ambivalence towards her new life is poignantly framed in the opening scene of the novel that describes the beach turtle. The

narrator continues to feel torn between a need to move forward with adult responsibilities and a growing panic at the trajectory her life as a wife and mother is taking.

The narrator of *Blue Skies* sees Ollie's obvious satisfaction in the drudgery of domestic life and cannot tolerate it. Ollie symbolised an exaggerated contentment in a suburban life that consistently eludes the narrator who is restless and unfulfilled. Death is on her mind and she is "disturbed" (152) by Ollie's presence. She is a constant reminder to the narrator that the home will become the focal point of her life as wife and mother. Thirteen years prior to the publication of *Blue Skies*, de Beauvoir wrote of the emptiness of women's fruitless domestic labour.

> So the wife's work within the home does not grant her autonomy . . . it does not open on to the future, it does not produce anything . . . The wife is not allowed to do any positive work and consequently to have herself known as a complete person. (de Beauvoir 497)

Hodgman's un-named narrator recognises in Ollie her own inevitable march towards death in the endless cycle of domestic maintenance. The narrator can see her own domestic future laid out in the figure of her next-door neighbour and how "it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine" (de Beauvoir 532). Ollie's maintenance does not produce anything beyond the ordinary, domestic task that it is. It is not the "positive work" (497) that de Beauvoir speaks of, as it does not extend beyond the boundary of her own home and family. Ollie's death from repetition and drudgery is inevitable, so the narrator neither regrets her actions nor mourns her.

Blue Skies, with its dark, comedic presentation of the intensity of life with an infant, represents a consistent yet humorous failure in negotiating between the life of woman and the role of mother. Chandler calls this extreme separation of a life as mother and a life as woman a "fallacy" (272):

> persons are not only autonomous, unitary, separated individuals but rather, fundamentally, and at every level, encumbered; nonetheless, much modern Western philosophy not only posits the self as separated, but esteems this separation as the basis of "freedom". Freedom, understood in this sense, is a fallacy—the esteeming of which constitutes one of the factors that enables and perpetuates the devalued status of the blatantly encumbered: mothers. (Chandler 272)

de Beauvoir's influential ideas prove problematic to a feminism that considered a woman as mother. In Chandler's view, de Beauvoir offered no alternative to the vision of freedom for a woman aside from one that is unencumbered "in the privileging of an emancipated, individuated, subjectivity" (Chandler 278). Woman and mother were presented as absolute binaries, with mother a role of severe restriction, having no ability to enrich a sense of self.

In *Blue Skies,* self-fulfilment is unreachable and results in its opposite: self-erasure. The binary of woman and mother remain concrete and unmoving in a narrative that explores the concerns of feminists, such as de Beauvoir, who could not see a path that would navigate between the two roles present in the social circumstances at the time of the publications of de Beauvoir and Hodgman's texts where a fulfilling maternal role and a role outside of motherhood could co-exist (Allen 230-233). The narrator experiences the world of marriage and motherhood as oppressive and containing an unmentionable undercurrent of threat and death. She is silenced by her lack of name and prevented from developing a clear subject position. She has not yet found her way to transition to a maternal subjectivity. She takes cover in both her madness and deceit by feigning innocence to all responsibility for Ollie's death and the inevitable outcome is yet another form of self-erasure.

Adrift, "stranded" (4) like the female turtle and closeted inside her home, Hodgman's novel ends within a page of Ollie's death, the reader also left adrift without the traditional closure of a novel's conclusion. What is left is not a mother in any culturally recognisable

sense. The narrator has been left unable to become a mother. She has not experienced self-growth in the process of matrescence but self-destruction. The self has been erased and the mother standing in her place is a shell; her metaphorical death foreshadowed in the turtle that dies after laying its eggs. The mother turtle is completely emptied in the act of giving life, but her death has purpose. The narrator continues her deception as suburban mother but in that process she is reduced to nothing. The woman has disappeared, and the mother never was.

Breath Tim Winton (2008)

Just over thirty years after the publication of Helen Hodgman's *Blue Skies*, prominent Australian author Tim Winton published *Breath.* His text also utilises the harsh contrasts of the Australian landscape to develop the inner life of his characters. While not a reflection on new motherhood, Winton's 2008 novel presents Eva's pregnancy as a contested site where risk, desire, life and death coalesce. While Hodgman's un-named narrator in *Blue Skies* gives a first-hand account of her conflicted feelings about wifehood and motherhood, Winton explores similar conflicts through the narrative of a teenage boy involved with a married pregnant woman who, like Hodgman's un-named narrator, rejects both the conventions of wifehood and motherhood. The landscape of the West Australian coastline in *Breath* provides the three male surfers at the heart of the plot the means to develop a sense of manhood and flirt with risk and danger. The second half of the novel provides periods of reflection for the young man, Pike, on the meanings of life and death at the mercy of the ocean's swells. His reflections also seek to understand his lover Eva's obsession with bringing herself to the brink of death multiple times during her pregnancy and well into her life as a mother. Matrescence and a smooth transition from independent woman to the new role of mother is also lacking in *Breath,* depicting a woman side-lined by the aspirations of her partner and ambivalent about impending motherhood.

Literary scholarship on *Breath* to date has not focused on Eva's maternal body in the way it will be examined here. Eva is represented in two main ways. She is presented as an outsider, and remains so throughout the narrative, linked to Winton's preoccupation with an idyllic Australia and as such is shown to be an example of "rampant Americanization of Australian society", which the author represents as destructive and outside the boundaries of ordinary Australian life (Ben-Messahel 16). This depiction is in line with readings of Winton's work that establish links between landscape, nation and masculinity (Thomas, Liu). Most often, critical readings of Eva take on the representation of a "fallen Eve" (McGloin 114) who is clearly "deviant" in her sexual behaviour (110), and who must be removed from the narrative as she "constitutes a significant threat to patriarchal femininity" (114). Feminist readings of female characters in Winton's earlier novels echo McGloin's reading of Eva, as a continuation of "problematic representations of femininity and corporeality" (Schuerholz 33). My focus in this analysis is not Winton's use of the feminine as symbolic of the nation or of his representation of women more generally as "other" who are "erotic, desired and feared" (Guy 31), although these readings form useful context in framing Eva's role in the narrative. McGloin's description of Eva as "fallen" (114) is a commonality among the three novels in this first section of this chapter, which reiterates the concept of sexual desire as incompatible with motherhood, resulting in the elimination of the transgressive mother from the plot by suicide or madness. My examination of Winton's text also looks closely at Eva's pregnancy for the ways in which her unsuccessful transition from sexualised woman to mother changes both her own and Pike's understanding of gender-based risk, life and choice.

The narrative is based on Pike's memories of his teen years when he and his best friend befriended a former surfing champion. Young teenagers "Pikelet", as he is known to his friends, and "Loonie" (17) look to "Sando" (67) as if they are "disciples" (79), while the risk-taking athlete pushes their new surfing skills to unimagined limits. The strain of

consistently trying to outdo Sando and Loonie in the water leaves Pike frustrated and lonely, unwilling to push the limits of risk too far for fear of deadly consequences. The novel's title refers to a young Pike and Loonie's favourite pastime, holding their breaths under water until "our heads were full of stars" (17). "Breath" is also a reference to Eva's multiple attempts to bring her body to the brink of death and the fulfilment of ultimate sexual pleasure by closing off oxygen to her lungs during sexual intercourse with Pike.

At fifteen, Pike is drawn into a sexual relationship with Sando's wife Eva. The affair has consequences on his adult life and on his understanding of the nature of risk. Their first sexual encounter begins out of boredom and frustration at Sando who has abandoned them both. The relationship quickly turns sour and repressive. Pike's realisation that Eva is pregnant during this time provides the first turning point of his life, and he naively assumes that the pregnancy has turned Eva's life for the better too. *Breath* explores the lasting effects of risk and choice in a narrative where pregnancy offers escape for Pike and a literal confinement for Eva.

Eva Sanderson first appears to Pike and Loonie as an abject example of the consequences of risk. Forced into retirement from professional aerial skiing as a result of an untreatable knee injury, Eva gives off a negative energy that is in stark contrast to her energetic and charismatic older husband. Whereas Sando has "a grace that made all our moves look jerky and hesitant" (69) Eva is "often tired . . . she struck me as a brooder, an unhappy soul . . . she could give the most neutral turn of phrase a sarcastic edge" (72). Sando calls her "bitter" (79) and accuses her of being resentful of his surfing career, "Jealous isn't just nasty, Eva. It's sad." (80). According to Loonie, Eva is "nothing but a stuck-up pain in the arse. She was a drag, a bitch, a stupid Yank, and a junkie . . . she's a whingein female." (83). Pike is more open to understanding her troubles and during the course of their relationship, she confides in him the full story of her skiing career and injury. She claims that

"the moments before she landed [from her aerial manoeuvre] were her last happy ones. I didn't want to believe her, but she was adamant" (219-20). He begins to feel "unnerved" when she finishes her story with "I miss being afraid . . . That's the honest truth" (220).

Fear and risk are intertwined in *Breath*, beginning with Pike's early descriptions of deep-water diving and breath holding competitions with Loonie, whom he describes as "greedy about risk" (38). He soon realises that he and Loonie experience surfing as a "huge body-rush . . . we quickly understood how narcotic the feeling was, and how addictive it became . . . I was stoned from just watching" (29). Pike has a natural inclination towards risk, but Loonie and Sando are described as people who take it to unnatural extremes. They live for the risk, and at first Pike is disappointed that he does not seem to have the courage needed to surf the larger waves they plan on taking. However, his relationship with Eva soon shows him the reality of taking such risks. At first, his affair with Eva is about both fulfilling their sexual desires and also as a way of escaping the rejection and loneliness they both feel when Sando and Loonie go overseas in search of greater surf. Sando uses dangerous surf to reinforce a sense of manhood in Pike and Loonie, and when Pike refuses to attempt a wave that is "the most dangerous wave I'd ever seen" (176), Pike's rejection of the ultimate risk severs his relationship with Sando and Loonie. Outcast and without purpose, in Eva he finds a common frustration at being outside their respective hyper-elite cliques of surfing and skiing. Their severance from their previous groups makes them prone to moping, cannabis addiction and fury. While Pike's fury and loneliness is young and naïve, Eva is truly bitter about her lost career and seeks more extreme forms of fusing pleasure, pain and risk.

Pike's thirst for risk is dampened when he attempts the monstrous wave "Old Smoky" (184) and, while successful the first time, he is caught amid a succession of crashing waves "the white world was trying to kill me" (187). When he finally reaches the surface, "my throat was jammed shut. I couldn't make myself breathe. And then . . . the air burnt down

sharp as any regret" (187). Pike's experience reminds him of the fatal danger of not enough air and he chooses not to take such a risk again. Eva's attitude to breath is similar to the risk-taking Sando and Loonie, where the physical pleasure of overcoming the need for air is worth repeating the risk again and again to the point of death.

Eva's initiation of her physical affair with Pike reveals both his youth, and her desire to take control of pleasure in her life when everything else remains frustratingly painful and out of her control. "You want to," Eva tells Pike. "You'll do it anyway" (198). After initiating foreplay, she then tells him jokingly "you don't have to," (198) but Pike already feels a sense of "false brightness" (198) about the whole situation. The detailed descriptions of the risks and pleasures of surfing in the lead up to this scene give way to more minimal detail, but by this stage in the narrative the relationship between surfing and intimacy with Eva is clear. There is a lot of anticipation, and sometimes pleasure, but equal parts pain and disappointment when Pike misreads the swell or Eva's mood.

Pike has instinctively experienced a sense of foreboding ever since he met Eva, which increases in intensity after his near-death solo surf of "Old Smoky" (184). He believes that he understands risk in relation to the ocean, and he also understands loneliness. His straightforward youthful perspective on life is a prominent contrast to Eva's darker attitude and physical retaliation against her unhappy marriage and unfulfilled career. The level of risk in this relationship between experienced woman and teenage boy is not enough for her. Eva craves being "afraid" (220) again, and a new level of sexual pleasure. According to McGloin, Eva's search for sexual pleasure "can be conceived as a form of desire that produces more pleasure than a phallus and therefore displaces the phallocentric symbolic order" (116). Once she introduces her "game" (221) of sexual asphyxia, Pike realises that he is out of his depth and is fearful of Eva's sinister attitude towards intimacy and life. Eva is at pains to point out to Pike that if he does not wish to participate then "I'll make do on my own" (Winton 224)

and when Pike is concerned that "it's not safe", Eva replies "Well, no guts no glory, huh?" (224). Eva's sexual pleasure is measured by her own standards and is taken into her own control. It is when Pike suspects that she is pregnant, "I saw the shape of her belly. There was a new tilt to her pelvis. She saw me staring" (221) that the level of risk escalates quickly. A close reading of pregnancy in this novel shows that Eva begins the game as a response to Pike noticing a change in her figure. The scene shows a state of denial about pregnancy. Like Hodgman's narrator who is "waiting to die" (Hodgman 4), Eva is not proactive or emotional about her pregnant state but submissive and lethargic regarding her future. What changes is her appetite for sexual risk, which only increases as her pregnancy progresses, demonstrating similarities to the un-named protagonist of *The Bride Stripped Bare* (Gemmell). The need to climb the heights of sexual pleasure is mirrored in her absent husband who is overseas scaling ever increasing walls of ocean. Sando's risk will bring him fame, but Eva's risk will bring her death, despite her desperation to bring back the thrill of fear she misses from skiing. While Sando might be seen to be escaping his marital woes, Eva's focus on sexual risk is emblematic of a deeper problem—adjusting to the idea of mother, which also assumes a role as wife.

It is unclear to both Pike and the reader in this scene whether Eva's introduction of "the game" (221) it is a direct diversion of his attention away from the fact of the pregnancy, or a desire for Eva to end her life or possibly attempt to harm her unborn. Although she chooses not to confirm her pregnancy at this stage, she responds by encouraging Pike to choke her during intercourse multiple times in the space of a few weeks. Pike is horrified by Eva's game and the way despair has seeped into their intimate life, leaving both her and Pike vulnerable. He looks back at her introduction of the game and wonders at her real intention throughout their whole relationship:

> Had it been an accident, this thing between us, or did she plan it, right down to the advent of the cellophane bag? And why me? Because Sando wouldn't play her game? . . . maybe there were things he just wouldn't do—and here I was, too young and stupid to refuse her. (227-28)

Pike is caught between his physical desire to continue his relationship with Eva and a new resentment growing towards her for involving him in this activity. These scenes with Eva echo Pike's previous dalliances with death, where he dived down to the riverbed and held his breath with Loonie until "our heads were full of stars" (17). These experiences were breath-taking in the literal sense but also gave them a sense of confidence over death and delight in life. Not only did these near-death experiences bring Loonie and Pike closer together but gave them a sense of pride and manhood. They were "men above the ordinary" (178). The current situation with Eva is menacing, and the contrast is more prominent in the presentation of a supposedly intimate scene: "each time I let go Eva's throat and ripped the slimy bag off her face I didn't see rapture. What I saw was death ringing her like a bell" (234). Pike is unprepared for the risk taking that Eva engages in. The risks he experienced in the surf had a very simple and desirable outcome: "When you make it . . . You feel *alive*, completely awake and in your body" (94). To Pike, Eva's desire is for death, despite her insistence that she does it for extreme pleasure.

Fortunately for Pike, pregnancy becomes a way for him to exit the relationship, as demonstrated in their tense encounter:

> I was trapped . . . nothing . . . would ever rescue me . . . but something did come . . .
>
> The livid vein that had begun to fork across Eva's tight belly . . .
>
> Eva, I said. You're pregnant. . . .
>
> Go home, she murmured. The fun's over now. . . . You knew it had to stop somewhere. I can't do this shit with a baby coming.

> Is it mine?
>
> Don't be absurd.
>
> I tried to count back but I didn't even know which numbers I required. . . .
>
> I felt my shock becoming relief. Not so much that the child was not mine, but that I'd been delivered. A new force had stepped in to present her with a defining choice. (236-37)

The implication is that the "force" (237) is the new life growing inside Eva, and that she will make the right choice towards a life of motherhood. It is at this point that Pike abruptly steps out of Eva's life. He has been delivered from the risk of being "the patsy left behind, the fool calling the ambulance, the one whose fingermarks were up and down her neck" (234), but he has also been delivered from trying to fix Eva's broken existence and her insistence upon death as an answer. Pike's youth is obvious once again when he naively assumes that Eva's life has taken a turn for a more predictable, happy role of wife and mother.

When Pike accidentally comes upon her at the beach one day, several months later, he is awe-struck by the beauty of her maternal body:

> Her breasts were huge and her belly shone. Her distended navel was like a fruit stalk. When she saw me she hoisted herself to her feet. I took in the lavish sway of her back and smiled. (244)

Eva's sudden maturation into physical beauty reassures him that she must be content with her maternal role: that outward beauty must somehow represent inner happiness. The initial description of Eva's body when Pike in fifteen is "a sequence of squares and cubes" (215) and "heavier than me, stronger" (199). McGloin writes that this deliberate description of Eva as unfeminine is important in positioning her as "excessive" (111) in her sexual transgressions in the male-dominated text about surf and ski culture, both traditionally masculine. Her pregnant body, by contrast, is curvaceous, and Winton draws attention to the

impact this feminine beauty has on Pike. Maternal beauty is celebrated because it does not carry with it the aggressive strength of Eva's earlier sexual encounters with Pike, which he is beginning to feel were exploitative. Her sexuality is now safely within the boundaries of the maternal. Winton returns to this idea of the conflicted beautiful maternal body later in Pike's narrative when he is married to Grace:

> When Grace was pregnant she said I was weird about it. Men, she said, were supposed to be turned off by all that fluid, the gross belly, the big backside and puffy ankles. *That* was normal . . . But reverent lust is another thing.
>
> What can you mean? I asked, still grinning.
>
> Well, it's creepy. . . .
>
> I was unnerved by the exchange. Years later . . . I made the mistake of returning to the conversation . . . There'd been a photo of an actress naked and pregnant on the cover of a glamour magazine, which sparked a surprising furore. To my mind it was a rather brave and beautiful image, but I was curious about what Grace might think . . .
>
> Grotesque, she said . . . Now they're mainstreaming porn. (250-51)

Both Eva and Grace feel abject in their maternal bodies. They are more comfortable in their bodies as regular and predictable. Pike, on the other hand, equates the growing of what he perceives as physical beauty with the growing of maternal feeling, a feeling he assumes is happiness. This is due to his experience as both a surfer and a paramedic. He has a distinct respect for the capabilities of the physical body. He has pushed his own body to its limits and can appreciate the way in which the pregnant body is pushed to its limits in the pursuit of life. Grace's comments about pregnancy are only given in the brief context of Pike's failing marriage and his inability to fully overcome the trauma caused by an unhealthy teenage relationship. But it is within this scene that the difference in attitudes towards pregnancy by a man and a woman are obvious. In his first experience of a pregnant woman, Pike can only

feel relief at not having to worry about the outcome of Eva's pregnancy. He can then appreciate the beauty of her pregnant body from a distance. But in the case of his twice-pregnant wife, there is no distance, and Grace senses something unnerving in Pike's attitude towards her body—not an appreciation but a "lust" (250) and perhaps an objectification that the reader knows is brought on by Pike's final intimate encounter with a heavily pregnant Eva (245). His feelings for Eva persist, despite the end of their relationship and the way it affected him psychologically.

Grace reads pregnancy as a purely physical experience from a feminine point of view. Pike experiences the female body as both pregnant and intimate, barely keeping death at bay while growing life. His lust is sparked by this condition of hovering between life and death, of surrendering to the forces that can both take existence and bring about a new future. He first experienced this through the thrill of surfing, but now has a deeper knowledge of it through his relationship with Eva. He reflects on his understanding of Eva's desire to play with risk now that he is in his middle age:

> Now I knew there was no room in my life for stupid risks. Death was everywhere—waiting, welling, undiminished. It would always be coming for me and for mine and I told myself I could no longer afford the thrill of courting it. (248)

Pike's surrender to the inevitability of death haunts him in his adult years and draws him to work as a paramedic where he can finally attempt to save those on the brink of death. Eva's journey into motherhood, however, is unknown in the narrative. Pike assumes a matrescence for Eva, sound in the knowledge that, like him, Eva has also outgrown the need for risk and sexual desire beyond ordinary family life. Even Sando has moved on from the surf to business, creating "quite an empire . . . there was much talk of risk in the financial sense" (253). It is the assumption that Eva has quietly moved onto the roles of faithful wife and mother as a "choice" (237), but this is not the case: she is "found hanging naked from the

back of a bathroom door in Portland, Oregon. A Salvadorian hotel employee discovered her with a belt around her neck" (253). Eva's desire for death had not diminished. Pike was unrealistic and naïve to think her pregnancy had given her a new purpose to life, while giving him the escape he needed. This scenario fitted well into the mind of a fifteen-year-old, eager to leave a traumatic experience behind him and assume all was well with the adults he left behind. But motherhood has not diminished the desire for fear, for risk and for an overwhelming sexual experience that takes Eva back to where it all began—her dazzling career on the ski slopes, free, independent, strong and without the encumbrance of a husband and child.

Eva's life in *Breath* is about the desperate erasure of motherhood in the hope of reclaiming a pre-mother self. McGloin is accurate in her description of Eva as a "fallen Eve" (114) due to her sexual deviance, but there is more to Eva's fall. Like Hodgman and Gemmell's transgressive female narrators, these women do not fall due to the fact of pregnancy itself or their sexual hunger. They fall because they cannot traverse the chasm that appears to them to be between the roles of woman and mother and the loss of freedom that occurs when transitioning into this new role. What remains for these characters that cannot make that successful transition to motherhood, narratively speaking, is death or madness. Eva's repeated risk-taking is a sort of madness, pursued because wifehood and motherhood have diminished her ability to feel "intense, consuming . . . exalted, invincible, angelic" (234) and so she is "eventually excised from the text" (McGloin 116). Motherhood and its related status in the novel of faithful wifehood only compound the sense of Eva's loss of self as athlete and as someone "above the ordinary" (Winton 178). *Breath* presents manhood as a place of growth and extraordinary potential, whereas motherhood is read as a loss of the extraordinary, a return to the safe boundaries of the physical world and the family domain.

The Bride Stripped Bare Nikki Gemmel (2003)

Nikki Gemmel's novel *The Bride Stripped Bare* differs notably from *Breath* and *Blue Skies* in that the protagonist has a genuine desire to become pregnant. Unlike the shock felt by the narrator of *Blue Skies* and the weary acceptance of Eva in *Breath* towards pregnancy, *Bride*'s narrator believes that:

> All women must want children eventually, you're sure, that furious need is deep in their bones, you don't quite believe any woman who says she doesn't. The urge has begun to harangue you as your thirties march on, it's an animal instinct grown bold . . . It's something that's in danger of overtaking your life, the want. (Gemmel 38)

Like *Blue Skies*, the narrator is un-named, but written in the second person so that the reader is invited to identify strongly or, indeed, become the protagonist. The narrative opens with a letter to a publisher. A middle-aged woman has found a manuscript written by her adult daughter who disappeared twelve months prior: "Her car was found at the top of the cliff in the south of England, yet her body was never recovered" (Prologue). The manuscript is the daughter's honest account of a sexual awakening by a series of extra-marital affairs. The unnamed daughter's account ends with the birth of a son and "a great gleeful happiness" (373). At the end of the manuscript the mother provides the following postscript: "to this date my daughter's whereabouts are unknown. My grandson's pushchair was also found by the cliff, but no bodies were ever recovered" (374). Like the previous two novels in this section, *Bride* explores sexual risk and thrill in the lead up to new motherhood alongside the performance of dutiful wifehood in public. This narrative also ends with the presumed death of the new mother and her child, echoing the watery deaths of the fallen woman figure of Victorian literature and visual culture (Meessen).

Each chapter of *The Bride Stripped Bare* is noted as a "lesson" (3) in numerical order, with a quote in italics. The quotes are from a book gifted to the narrator by her grandfather, titled *A Treatise proveinge by sundrie reasons a Woemans worth* published by an anonymous author in 1603 (Anonymous). Not only do the lessons eventually form the book that the narrator is writing, but they point to the secret practical sexual lessons the narrator is giving weekly to Gabriel, a fellow member of her writers' group. Like *Breath,* the narrator reaches a point of monotony in her affair with Gabriel where she seeks further risk and adventure. She attempts to recreate several sexual fantasies in real life only to be left disappointed that the reality is not what she was expecting. It is at this point that she resolves to become pregnant to her husband Cole as "this will wipe everything out. To begin afresh" (254). The narrator feels that she has subdued her sexual desire in the last few months and is ready for committed wifehood and motherhood. "You want a child, it's the only desire, at the moment that's clear cut. You are thirty-six. You need to start" (254-255).

Ironically, it is pregnancy which increases her sexual desire. Despite assuming that "you'll disappear again into the quiet life, refreshed and compliant, never needing another hit" (255), the narrator finds herself unsettled with desire, and Cole "doesn't want to be intimate anymore, he's afraid of harming the baby now you're showing, he's repulsed by the thought of making love to a pregnant woman. That Demi Moore, on the cover of Vanity Fair, it was disgusting, he said." (270) As in *Breath,* reference to the popular yet controversial photographs of actress Demi Moore naked and heavily pregnant in 1991 (Collins) signals the contrast in attitudes towards the pregnant body: in *Breath,* Pike sees the beautiful erotic whereas his wife Grace views it as objectifying the maternal body. Meredith Nash explains the controversy behind this celebrity image: "Demi Moore asserts a space for the pregnant body in the public realm as a complete detachment from the rules and regulations that govern the pregnant body with regard to body image, sexuality and status." This image, she writes,

"began the process of dismantling the stereotypes surrounding the pregnant body" (Nash 29) in popular culture. Cole, however, is "repulsed" (Gemmell 270) by his wife's changing shape, and views intimacy in her condition as sexually transgressive. His attitude towards the state of pregnancy is likened to what Musial regarded as the binary tropes of the Madonna and the whore (Musial 394). In contrast, the narrator is surprised by her physical reaction to her pregnancy: "You expected a life made stodgy by fat ankles and smocks and bloat. But as the child brews in its vat you're thrumming with life and with want" (Gemmell 271). Rather than retreat into a life of quiet waiting as she expected, the narrator is competing with:

> a new force within you, competing with the men . . . It's beautiful and terrible what the baby is doing to you, there's a great violence to the beauty, it's fascinating, erotic, obscene. (308)

The contradiction of the pregnant body is explored through the narrator's thoughts of her husband, her ex-lover Gabriel and her future self as mother. In this regard, she is confused, as "So many people think of you now as just one thing: the carrier of a new life. You're not meant to be sexual, you're a mother" (296). What she does find is that her pregnant body is experiencing not just the growth of another human being but the growth of a new sexual awakening—unexpected, after she has put an end to her sexual encounters outside her marriage. Interestingly, this is the extent of the narrator's pondering on the binary between the sexual and the maternal woman. For all her unconventional sexual experiences, including travelling to Spain for sex with Gabriel while seven months pregnant, Gemmell's narrative does not take the narrator's desire beyond the state of pregnancy.

After the birth of her son, she briefly refers to second-wave feminist writer Germaine Greer and the concept of motherhood as loss of independence. She counters this idea with a new realisation: "Germaine, poor love, was wrong: this isn't a catastrophic decline in your quality of life, it's living made luminous" (368). And yet, the next page, the narrator turns her

mind again to sexual excitement, to stress that, “At this point you cannot tolerate lust and nurturing at the same time. Your fantasies have completely gone. You miss them, but suddenly you cannot conjure them out of thin air. You’re sure, one day, they’ll return; you hope” (370). The narrator’s captivation by her new baby is fleeting for she is already seeking out a time when sexual activity can become a priority, the assumption being that the fantasies may not necessarily be confined to her marriage. When the narrator glimpses Gabriel on the street while out with her husband and new baby, she refers to her new family as “a picture of domesticity” (373), but what remains the focus of her narrative is the “strange, glittery time in your life. There’s no other time worth talking about yet” (373). The transition to motherhood is not as exciting as her affair with Gabriel; it is “luminous” (368) but does not supersede the impact of her sexual awakening prior to childbirth.

The narrative ends on the following page with her mother’s postscript detailing the pushchair found at a cliff. The narrator’s “crush of love” (371) towards her son is conflicting with her feelings towards Cole, domesticity and her burgeoning creative writing project based on her reading of *Treatise proveinge by sundrie reasons a Woemans worth.* As in previous novels discussed, the transgressive female is “excised from the text” (McGloin 116) with a sudden disappearance and apparent infanticide-suicide. The possibility that she took her son’s life darkens her sexual transgressions from a narrative of erotic fiction to a narrative about the failure to transition to a stable sense of maternal subjectivity. The second-person narrator blurs the boundaries between protagonist and reader in addition to the layering of a creative character who is writing herself into her own book that is later found by her mother. She is unreliable in her position as an “everywoman” (Appignanesi) and a narrator because the ending shows that everyone may have been deceived. It remains unclear what her actual experiences have been as a narrator, and what has been added on as the narrator becomes the writer of her book. Throughout the narrative, she has been

> Thinking of the book you've been writing; you've done all that is in it but your husband will never know, for you are the good wife. This is how you will choose to end it. (373)

This unstable narrative-within-narrative conclusion, book-ended by a postscript from the narrator's mother, may also be read as an indication of the instability of the narrator's matrescence. The binary she noticed early in her pregnancy between "sexual" and "mother" (296) has not been negotiated. The sexual has been suppressed in the hope that it will naturally wane, but her fleeting glance at Gabriel in the final scene presented before her death has undermined her ability to play the "picture" (373) of "the good wife" (373). Perhaps once the sheen of new motherhood wore off, she discovered the disappointment claimed by Germaine Greer, leaving the narrator in an unhappy marriage with a child and no new path to reawaken her sexuality. Suicide, like madness, remains a simple and effective narrative technique to exit transgressive mothers from plots without having to take the plot through the complexities of coalescing the two aspects of the sexual and the maternal.

Conclusion to Section 1: The Problematic "Narrative Closure" of Suicide and Madness

In the concluding sections of *Finding the Plot: A Maternal Approach to Madness in Literature,* Megan Rogers calls for feminist critics and women writers interested in feminist projects to re-write these plots where transgressive females experience "narrative closure" (102) via death or madness. Rogers argues that clear steps to reimagine fictional women out of madness "enables discussions . . . of how fiction about madness duplicates through its structure the essentialist thinking that identifies women with irrationality in the first place" and a new structure which "supports a literature and criticism that improves the lives of read women" (167). *Finding the Plot* expands upon the groundwork of Gilbert and Gubar's *The*

Madwoman in the Attic and the texts of Elaine Showalter, which provided analysis of women's writing, women characters and the themes of death, madness, suicide and captivity. Rogers theorises novels that consistently depict women in circumstances of madness and suicide reinforce feminine stereotypes of women as helpless to circumstance and lacking agency. *Blue Skies*, *Breath* and *The Bride Stripped Bare* depict women who are unable to successfully transition to motherhood, who experience an unsuccessful matrescence and who experience narrative closure by suicide or madness. This continuing tradition of rendering transgressive females mad or dead in fiction is the dominant understanding of wifehood. Monogamy and sexual containment remain the conditions of the patriarchal structures of marriage and childrearing (Bueskens 77). Where these historically dominant tropes are infused with twenty-first-century meanings is in the fictional explorations of loss and the image of the woman as free compared to the mother who is "constrained" (Bueskens 168). The recurrent use of madness and death works to solidify the binary Elisabeth Badinter (7) refers to, between independent woman and mother.

Narratives that are not able to demonstrate some transition between life stages from woman to mother reinforce the idea that motherhood is a fixed place where selfhood and sexuality is lost, and interdependence between mother and children is parasitic to individualism. The "unencumbered" (Chandler 272) woman becomes the new dominant in these narratives about maternity, reiterating the concept that it is womanhood which is the ideal state. Unsuccessful motherhood becomes a trap from which there is literally no exit but death or madness for the mother. Therefore, it can be proposed that twenty-first-century fiction on the maternal can tend to constrain the figure of the mother twice: once as wife, and once as mother who must abandon the individual woman behind in order to become the successful mother. Whereas Bueskens and Maushart have demonstrated that historically the wife and mother were seen as the one ideal expression of femininity, twenty-first-century

fiction has seen a splitting of the feminine into separate spheres. The twenty-first-century wife is individual insofar as she has a public life outside of the home—so long as her fidelity remains to her husband and the structure of traditional marriage. Once the woman experiences pregnancy, the individual must be abandoned by the time of birth in order to fully and therefore successfully transition to the role of mother. The narrative conflict and the climax of the plot in this fiction, hinges on the notion of motherhood as an unstable transition, as having the likely potential to erase one's sense of self and the stability of one's mind. These representations reinforce Stephens' finding of "motherhood as loss" (91).

Although these are only three detailed examples from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century[3], they point to a dominant pattern of literary portrayals of young motherhood as a life-defining moment that when unsuccessfully navigated, becomes a catalyst for destruction. These three novels continue the strong literary tradition of the suicide and madness of the transgressive woman, including women who were transgressive mothers (Dermitzakis; Gilbert and Gubar; Higonnet; Lieberman; McGuire). The problem of this repeated portrayal of motherhood as loss is in its establishment as part of a canon of tropes used in literature on the maternal. This repeated literary projection of motherhood as loss becomes problematic when it has the potential to overshadow any stories of maternal empowerment and loss becomes the overarching theme of literature on the maternal experience.

[3] While Julie Myserson's 1994 novel *Sleepwalking* does not form part of this chapter due to its emphasis on the role of the father and childhood abuse, this novel is another example of the sexually transgressive pregnant woman who falls into a period of madness. The protagonist only emerges from this stage upon commitment to a life of motherhood and wifehood.

Section 2: Matrescence and Community in the Postpartum Period

While the more contemporary characters presented in the two novels in this section have successfully transitioned from girl to woman before becoming a wife, the "time of mother-becoming" or "matrescence" (Raphael 66) remains a challenging process that had profound consequences for life and sanity, as explored in Section 1 of this chapter. While the costs of an unsuccessful matrescence in *Breath, The Bride Stripped Bare* and *Blue Skies* was high, O'Farrell's *The Hand that First Held Mine* and Higgins' *The Mothers' Group* employ multiple perspectives to demonstrate the possibilities of matrescence when it involves an understanding of the past as an independent woman and a willingness to move towards a future as a mother of a dependent child. As Balsam writes, "Becoming a mother is a developmental process, and carries with it positive and negative effects on a woman's subjective sense of herself" (466). It is the impact of family and community demonstrated in the novels by O'Farrell and Higgins that enables the young mothers in these narratives to create a stable understanding of self as both woman and mother. These novels are examples of emerging fiction on the maternal that chronicle the journey of motherhood as enriching, despite its challenges.

The Hand that First Held Mine Maggie O'Farrell (2010)

Northern Irish-British writer Maggie O'Farrell's fifth novel foregrounds the pivotal role that identity has in the development of maternal subjectivity through the character of Elina. The novel tells two narratives side by side: the story of Lexie, beginning in the mid-1950s, when she leaves her rural village as a young woman for a new life in London, and the present-day narrative of new parents Ted and Elina. The narratives begin to intertwine, with the reader soon realising that Lexie may be Ted's unknown birth mother. Ted experiences a breakdown

in mental health triggered by the birth of his son and the realisation that he cannot clearly remember his own early childhood. Reclaiming a strong sense of his past becomes an urgent need for Ted, to make sense of his own new role as a father. Mirrored in Elina is her own need to claim her past life as artist before motherhood so that she can experience a successful evolution in her identity as woman, artist and mother.

The novel balances comedic scenes alongside drama, focusing on the visceral aspects of infant care that provide Elina with ongoing challenges. Her blood, breastmilk and her infant's excrement literally saturate her early days of motherhood, heightened by her acute sense of aesthetics as a visual artist. O'Farrell focuses on the importance of identity for both parents for them to transition as a couple to their respective roles of mother and father. Older characters, such as Ted's father, his adoptive mother and his adoptive grandmother, are set up as failed parents whose selfish mistakes have caused his identity crisis.

O'Farrell begins Elina's narrative with her startling discovery that she was an artist before her son was born. She has experienced strong lapses in memory since the delivery of her son and although she is aware of a large gash across her lower abdomen, severe pain and weakness, she cannot recall the exact details of her son's birth and has only vague memories of life before entering the maternity hospital:

> It says in her passport, on her tax return, on forms she has to fill in that she is an artist. But she doesn't know what that means. She cannot recall when she was last in her studio, she cannot remember how you be an artist, what you do, how you spend your time. (24)

Elina's memory losses encapsulate her profound sense of erasure as a woman. The activities that gave her life purpose prior to motherhood are out of reach and beyond her knowledge. Isolating herself due to the persistent crying and fussing of her baby, she has "such an ache to go out, to see something other than the interior walls of this house, to apprehend the world, to

move about in it" (223). Her memory lapses, weakness from surgery and the toll of caring for an unsettled infant fix her into a temporary state where she is in-between her previous life as an artist and partner, and not yet able to achieve a successful transition to new motherhood. This transitional state is marked by the claustrophobic interior of Elina's home, not unlike Hodgman's narrator in *Blue Skies* who felt the day stand still at three o'clock each afternoon and the stifling heat of summer. The temporary accommodation of one body growing within another during pregnancy is mirrored in *The Hand that First Held Mine* by suspending Elina in another transitional stage postpartum. She attempts to accommodate both her former artist-self and her new maternal-self within the same body at the same time, and there are many months of confusion and dissonance until an understanding of her new maternal-self is reached.

An example of Elina's thwarted attempt to reconcile her old life and her new motherhood occurs when Ted notices that Elina has visited her studio for the first time since their son was born, and that she has taken baby Jonah in with her. Ted:

> has to suppress the urge to clap his hands as he watches her through her studio window . . . She will be all right. He can see the special look on her face . . . He feels the excitement radiating from her. She's working. (146)

Ted is relieved to see that Elina is feeling well and going back to her regular activities after being so confused and weak for many weeks after the birth. However, Ted's excitement is short-lived when Jonah's needs do not allow for a structured return to the studio, and Elina breaks down: "'How can I go back to work?' she cries, gesturing at the screaming baby" (147). Elina experiences shock by the sudden shift in her physical and emotional boundaries when her studio, as a sacrosanct space of creative work, becomes contaminated in her view by her baby's relentless needs.

Transitional situations, such as Elina's in *Hand*, have been explored by Lorin Basden Arnold as a common experience in her 2014 article, "I Don't Know Where I End and You Begin: Challenging Boundaries of the Self in Intensive Mothering". Arnold surveyed a range of "maternal narratives of mothering" (48), sourced from blogs, and found a recurring theme on the separation of self from the infant and the loss of bodily boundaries for the mother. The state of being pregnant is the first experience of "occupying the space of both self and other" (49), and despite cultural assumptions that mother and baby become independent subjects at birth, Arnold argues that the assumed notions of intensive mothering rely on interconnectedness and self-sacrifice of the body, sleep, and individuality on the part of the mother in order to fully nurture the child. This constant connection between mother and child is "the leakiness between one's self and others" (Shildrick, "This Body" 78). Boundaries between home and work, individuality and mothering, personal space and bodily functions such as breastfeeding are constantly being eroded, subject to "interruption" (Baraitser) and negotiated as the mother attempts to reconcile the needs of the child with the needs of herself.

O'Farrell's narrative again places Elina in a state of leaky boundaries when the contents of Jonah's overfilled soiled nappy end up all over Elina, the bathroom floor, the walls, "soaking through her skirt into her underwear. The smell is indescribable. And Jonah screams and screams" (285). Elina's senses are assaulted all at once, and though the situation is comic, it also contains an earnest understanding of what Arnold terms "a disrupting experience" (53). Not only is Elina coming to terms with the absence of her subject position as artist, but the profound change in her body. Elina quickly becomes fearful about Ted's overwhelming concern for her wellbeing in the first few weeks postpartum and is reluctant to ask how the baby was delivered. As her memory gradually returns in the form of flashbacks and nightmares of "fountains of red liquid" (93), Elina pieces together the details of an

emergency C-section that are at complete odds with her notions of motherhood prior to the birth:

> when she was still pregnant . . . in the morning she would do her yoga exercises . . . she did sketches . . . she read books about natural births. She wrote lists of names in charcoal on her studio walls . . . She cannot fathom, cannot grasp what happened to that person, that Elina of the charcoal lists . . . How did she become this—a woman in stained pyjamas, standing weeping at a window, a woman frequently possessed by an urge to run through the streets, shouting, will somebody please help me, please? (49)

Although she survived a hemorrhage after an emergency surgery to deliver her baby, Elina experiences a profound sense of loss, to the point where she can only recall her name clearly (49) and all other details remain vague. She feels as if "her life has sprung four thousand holes" (29) where days melt into nights, meals and conversations are forgotten, and all that she can focus on is the "sharp scorch of pain" (48) from her abdomen and the basic care of her infant. Elina's maternal experience has been literally written across her body, with its "gash . . . its crooked, stumbling path through her flesh" (64), "deflated, loose skin" (16) and "A new smell. She doesn't smell like she used to" (25). In her postpartum weeks, Elina must coalesce her old life with a new one; this involves change in her entire being, from her physical smell and body, to her creative identity, to an acceptance of the loss of personal boundaries between her son and herself. Lisa Baraitser describes these experiences as "moments of undoing" (3). It is in the understanding and the acceptance of the multiplicity of these moments that the mother who sees the world through her pre-mother subjectivity can begin to:

> glimpse something we may term maternal subjectivity . . . The overtones of these experiences are those of embarrassment, discomfort, exhaustion, shock, surprise,

> blankness . . . Yet by thinking through these experiences, something we might call maternal subjectivity may emerge. (Baraitser 4)

What she cannot comprehend in this early state of motherhood is the seeming lack of physical impact on her male partner: "How strange, she thinks, that he is so physically unchanged. When I am unrecognisable" (175). However, what drives Elina to discover the truth behind her delivery and begin to gain a sense of control again over her life is her strong concern for Ted's psychological health. It is her need to assist him that propels her to quickly assess the reality of her new life as a mother to an infant and to prepare to negotiate upcoming challenges. O'Farrell mirrors Elina's challenging first weeks of new motherhood with the decline in mental health of her partner:

> What is wrong with him? Maybe some men lost the plot when women have babies—Elina doesn't know and she can't think who to ask. Perhaps it's normal for them to become a little distracted, a little withdrawn. It seems that just as she is beginning to rise, to struggle, blinking and gasping, to the surface, he is starting to sink (139).

Ted experiences a return of his childhood visual disturbances, where unrelated memories and images blur into colours and shifting shapes that distort his vision temporarily. Ted is told the truth after confronting his parents, that Lexie was his biological mother who drowned at sea when he was three. Ted's father and his wife figuratively drown out any memory Ted had of his real mother who lived a wholly independent and unconventional life as a single mother and arts journalist in mid-1960s London.

When read alongside Elina's narrative of a slow but successful maternal transition, Lexie's drowning can be read as exemplifying her inability to reconcile all the varied aspects of her life into one cohesive, whole identity. Journalist, mother, lover and independent woman all struggle for priority. Lexie's narrative gives multiple examples where she is overwhelmed. There is her first love, Innes, and grief at his sudden death. There is an

overwhelming love for her son Theo, numerous unwanted male advances and the pressure of trying to work and be a single mother at the same time. O'Farrell describes her drowning as a moment where the young mother in the turbulent surf "saw what was coming. She knew the struggle had begun and she knew that she was losing" (350). Julie Stephens' exploration into research methods on motherhood gives her the prevailing sense that women feel at a loss when it comes to balancing independence, work and self-identity. Lexie's lost battle may be read as a literary "voice" (Stephens, "Beyond Binaries" 92) symbolic of motherhood's overwhelming confrontations with multiple aspects of identity and the struggle to gain a newly maternal subjectivity.

Her death by drowning, although accidental, is not a coincidental plot device when considered alongside the texts of fallen women discussed in Section 1. Lexie, like Eva in *Breath* and the narrators in *Blue Skies* and *Bride*, rejects conventional notions of monogamy and marriage. Continually seeking sexual and financial independence, Lexie is also "excised from the text" (McGloin 116) and her son is taken to live with his biological father and his new wife, who then try to ensure three-year-old Ted has forgotten who his real mother was. Not only is she erased from the narrative, this transgressive character is erased from her son's memory.

Lexie fails to live as a successful mother figure, but Elina's transition to motherhood is deemed successful, as she finds ways to fuse her life before and after children and is able to assist Ted to find his way to fatherhood as well. Elina can be read as holding to the conventions of a "good wife" (Gemmell 373) in her struggle towards matrescence along with her nurturing capacities assisting her husband to transition to his role as father. Thus, Elina mothers both her infant son and her husband who is motherless. She is, in these aspects, opposite to the fallen Lexie, and therefore Elina is held in the narrative as a successful example of young motherhood.

While the repetition of conventions of good wifehood and the "naturalization" and "idealization" (O'Reilly "Patriarchal Motherhood" 65) of motherhood may be read as simply reinforcing stereotypical notions of what the transition to motherhood is supposed to be, O'Farrell's text offers one successful example of matrescence where other novels have left their female protagonists dead or mad. On its own, *The Hand that First Held Mine* is not enough to be deemed what Raymond Williams might term an "emergent" ("Base and Superstructure" 11) text on the maternal. This thesis, however, is an exploration of emergent *qualities* among texts, done with the understanding that since dominant ideas about motherhood remain dominant across centuries, it is only through small changes across time that larger changes in writing on the maternal experience can be seen.

The Mothers' Group Fiona Higgins (2012)

The Mothers' Group by Fiona Higgins represents the lives of six new mothers in the first year of their children's lives and is set in urban Australia. The novel is an example of commercial fiction that forms part of a flourishing genre Lily Gurton-Wacher terms "the literature of pregnancy and new motherhood" (1), a combination of literary forms that explore the pregnant and postpartum period. While sometimes using the form of the novel, this literature of pregnancy and new motherhood often utilises poetry, memoir, letters and ficto-criticism to delve into the visceral experiences of the maternal. In the first instance, this new material fills a gap, as "for the most part, motherhood is simply missing from our literary and philosophical traditions" (Gurton-Wacher 5). It places motherhood at the forefront of what Lauren Elkin calls:

> the big themes of literature but one that is intimately bound up in with the concerns it has more readily acknowledged: war, peace, love, loss, the city, the country, murder, madness, race, class, apocalypse, alienation. (Elkin 2)

A literature of motherhood not only draws attention to what has been missing for centuries in the accepted canon of Western literature but is also a collection of "books that are putting motherhood on the map, literally speaking, arguing forcefully, through their very existence, that it is a state worth reading about for anyone, parent or not" (1-2). O'Reilly terms the current generation of writing by mothers and about motherhood as "matrifocal narratives, written as they are from the voice of the mother and from her perspective" ("Stories to Live By" 371). Higgins' novel and narratives with a similar focus can be seen as matrifocal.

These matrifocal narratives invite readers who are mothers to see themselves mirrored in the characters, of mothering experiences that are varied, challenging, successful and unsuccessful. Elkin herself approached this literature of new motherhood not as a writer but as a mother: "I love my unborn baby in a strange unthinkable way, because he himself is unthinkable. It is the work of literature to help us think through the unthinkable" (4). Literature that explicitly focuses on the physical and emotional experiences of pregnancy and new motherhood not only places these experiences within a new literary tradition and makes "visible" (Elkin 2) the lives of mothers but allows readers who are mothers to see aspects of their experiences played out in the stories available to them in a way that is very different to social media or the self-help genre of pregnancy literature. Elkin found these mediums about motherhood to focus too heavily on "a certain performative, competitive competency" (3) and the "consumption sustaining the motherhood industry" (4) rather than a deep and thoughtful exploration of the ways "the bodies we live in shape our experience of the world" (Elkin 3). Elkin's review of the current motherhood literature touches on social media's encouragement of new mothers as consumers and competitors. However, she finds that it is creative work on motherhood that offers a much-needed perspective from the "versions of motherhood" that are "failing us" (3) offered by the free market and the uncensored world of blogging, advertising and competition. Literature can "grapple . . . with what this new state

means" (3). While my analysis of *The Mothers' Group* shows that literature is not always capable of grappling with complex concepts within every narrative, it nonetheless demonstrates that the literature of pregnancy and new motherhood can offer a perspective to readers that is comforting in its familiarity yet confronting in its creativity. While Elkin may refer to this negotiation within fiction between comfort and discomfort as a "grapple" (3), Raymond Williams describes this important cultural and intellectual engagement in written communication as "structure of feeling" (Williams, *The Long Revolution* 104). This concept refers to means by which incremental amounts of cultural change can occur; its progression manifests in the contested spaces of literature. What Higgins presents in her novel is a group of new mothers whose "feeling" (104) is the desire for commonality with one another as all being mothers of infants outweighs individual differences.

The Mothers' Group emphasises the need for a community of mothers. It also deals with the physical loss of an infant in a drowning accident, coincidentally at the picnic to celebrate both the first birthdays of each child in the mothers' group and the individual women's first Mother's Day. The six members of this group have been brought together by their local council baby health centre and agree to meet informally and continue socialising as they navigate the changing needs of their growing babies as well as the tumultuous changes in themselves as a result of becoming mothers.

Higgins uses intertextuality through the mothers' group book club to highlight two well-known early twenty-first-century texts about the lives of women: Elizabeth Gilbert's self-discovery memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) and Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003) about the disastrous consequences of motherhood gone awry. The characters of *The Mothers' Group* read and discuss Gilbert's book first, then delve into Shriver's novel months later (title shortened to *Kevin* thereafter). While the contents of the book club discussions make up only a small part of the overall narrative, their reference in the

individual narratives of each mother in *The Mothers' Group* provides a point of reference that the characters use to contrast life before having children with the work of mothering beyond the infant years.

Higgins' novel makes use of a third person narrator to explore the intimate lives of the six characters in the mothers' group. Care is taken by Higgins to provide a cast of characters that encompasses many issues common to new mothers in an Australian context, such as delivery of the baby, hospital systems, parenting styles and the concept of a mothers' group.

The first perspective is provided by Ginie, a career-focused investor who becomes unexpectedly pregnant to a new lover several years her junior. His lack of income from a yet-to-be-written novel and his love of surfing makes her sceptical that she should continue with the pregnancy, but Daniel is insistent on the potential life-changing joy that a child and marriage could bring to them both. She claims that at the age of thirty-nine and with "private health insurance" she "could have demanded" an elective caesarean (7), "But a part of her wanted to *conquer* childbirth, as she had conquered all the other challenges in her life to date. An elective caesarean seemed like a cop-out, and Ginie wasn't a quitter" (7-8). However, the birth does not go as planned and an emergency C-section is required. Ginie's pain and recovery is described as difficult and "intense" (8) but her initial concerns about her pain level are dismissed by the first midwife who replies with "You're not due for any more pain relief. If you have an intervention like a caesarean, it will hurt more. Natural births are much easier on the body. Pain is very subjective, dear" (9). Her pain is recognised when Ginie shouts at another midwife that "I've been telling your imbecile colleagues all night. But they're too interested in making sure my milk comes in, never mind my fucking pain" (9). Ginie's experience is used to subtly critique the promotion of natural birth and breastfeeding as best for both infant and mother and provides the novel with a character whose plan for childbirth and breastfeeding becomes a traumatic experience beyond her control. She evokes

empathy in the reader early on, despite her judgmental outlook and abrupt nature, because beneath the sharp-tongued exterior she is battling many common emotions of new motherhood. A difficult birth followed by breastfeeding problems and a lack of instant bonding with her daughter, Rose, brings "crushing guilt" (10) which she hides from the other members of the mothers' group. The feelings she has about her newborn has Ginie considering mothering in a more realistic light, as:

> she'd been half expecting to have the sort of personal epiphany she'd heard about in other women: a loss of desire to work, and a sudden passion for the grander, higher calling of motherhood. But Ginie had worked too hard, become too specialised, to let go of it all lightly. One type of love, the maternal kind, had not usurped the other. Her love of the law remained. (17)

Ginie is the most work-focused of the women, contrasted with Made, newly arrived from Bali who relishes her role as a full-time mother. In Made's traditional village upbringing, working full-time outside the home means that family-owned land is not enough to sustain a living and extra income must be sourced. Her experience of work is difficult and exhausting in contrast with the Western characters who crave the refreshing change from home that work brings.

The text operates to give the 'every woman' feel to the cast of characters. Within this group of six, there is someone that many a first-time mother as reader can relate to: the birth injury, the emergency C-section, the single mother, the migrant mother, the mother with relationship difficulties and the mother of a baby with a toddler. The focus placed on Made's narrative within the overall plot critiques the text *Eat, Pray, Love* chosen for their first mothers' group book club discussion. Made's experience of Bali is one of poverty, hardship and, as a teenage girl seeking work outside of her village, the constant risk of exploitation. Her marriage to Gordon, a middle-aged Australian businessman working in Bali, offers her

the chance to escape poverty. Australia as a Western society promises financial security and comfort. The Bali portrayed in Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* is, in contrast, a place of self-discovery, relaxation and exoticism. Gilbert has deliberately abandoned the relative comforts of Western life in search of another way of experiencing the world. Her freedom to travel unencumbered is satirised by the members of the book club, and it is Miranda who claims:

> I just wondered how hard the author's life *really* was . . . I mean, she didn't have any children, did she? I . . . hated how much she *didn't* know about life. I kept thinking to myself, honey, if you think this is worth whining about, just wait until you have kids. (58).

Miranda is struggling with an alcohol addiction which she hides from the others who are only aware that she is struggling with the mothering of a newborn and a three-year-old stepson with behavioural challenges. This first novel set for the book club highlights the perceived privilege and independence that these young mothers see in Elizabeth Gilbert and other women who are childless. They are grappling with the "individualization" (O'Reilly, "Patriarchal Motherhood" 65) where their work as mothers is mostly done alone and in the private sphere of the home. Miranda feels a critical disconnection between life before and after becoming a mother: "I used to be someone, she'd thought. Important people asked me for my opinion. Her life before children . . . had never felt so remote" (165). Made tells the group that in Bali, the large extended family share the role of child rearing (131) and child responsibility (158) but she finds solace in this group of women who "weren't so different from her, after all" (112). Made recognises that mothering in Australia is a different paradigm, one more disconnected and birth mother-centred than her experience of interconnected extended family and intergenerational ties in Bali.

When the book club turns to its choice of Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* Miranda picks up that "The title of the book was interesting, because it's the one thing they

never did" (157). The increasing disconnect between Shriver's protagonist Eva and her husband Franklin, and the dissonance between Eva and Kevin, also plays out in *The Mothers' Group*. Miranda is shocked when her stepson Digby claims to "want to give Rory a kiss" only to deliberately bite his infant brother on the cheek (165). She then discovers infant Rory with a small wooden toy lodged in his mouth, a toy she had ensured was locked up the night before:

> Only Digby could have opened the toolbox. He knew Rory wasn't allowed to play with it, as its pieces were too small . . . Most of the time Digby was just an irritating toddler, but actions like this felt premeditated (175-6).

Her husband Willem is work-focused and barely at home. He "terminated the nanny's contract without consultation" for the elder child once Miranda took maternity leave for their newborn son, leaving her for weeks on end at home with two children. Miranda's frustration at Digby's behaviour and her struggle to manage him and a younger sibling with an increasingly distant husband echoes *Kevin,* as does the sense that a silent battle is occurring between mother and child (172). The vexations of motherhood are amplified in both novels in scenes where a mother is alone in the home with the children, the private sphere becoming a landscape of domestic drama.

Ironically, not only do Eva and Franklin of *Kevin* fail to discuss the most important problem of their lives as parents, but neither do the women of the mothers' group intimate about their private mothering and relationship struggles. Their stories are related to the reader, but not to each other, until they hit crisis points. The choice of book club texts and the order of their reading points to the contrast in the lives of the mothers before and after children. 'Before' was a time of independence and self-discovery and the focus on the self of Gilbert's memoir. 'After' childbirth comes the ambivalence represented by Eva's letters to

Franklin. Like Eva, Miranda in *The Mothers' Group* does not represent O'Reilly's societal "idealization" of the mother ("Patriarchal Motherhood" 64) but a starker reality.

The most profound difference in *The Mothers' Group* compared to other novels in this chapter is its focus on the contrast between individuality and community. The mothers do not necessarily like each other from the outset, but there is an unspoken agreement that they will commit to supporting each other through their first year as mothers. This comes to a climax when Cara asks Miranda to look after her one-year-old Astrid during the collective group Mother's Day picnic. Unbeknown to Cara, Miranda has been drinking alcohol throughout the morning and upon suddenly discovering during the picnic that her husband Willem has been having an affair she is violently sick. In the confusion that follows between looking after Miranda and her two children by her fellow mothers' group members, Astrid toddles off, unnoticed, to the dam and drowns silently in the shallow water. The group is fractured once it is discovered that Miranda had been drinking and may be criminally responsible, but it is Made who consistently tries to bring the group together and leaves Balinese offerings for healing to each mother she visits.

Made's offering to Cara comes with a letter inviting her to spend time in Bali with Made's family, "time to be still and have healing place" (289). Cara's first thought is "This isn't *Eat, Pray, Love*, she thought. There *is* no happy ending" (290). Whereas Gilbert's text took the reader on her journey of self-discovery after divorce, Higgins' novel explores the tumults of the first twelve months of intensive mothering across a group of women. Despite their differences, it is their common bond as mothers that kept the group cohesive. Higgins does choose a happier ending for Cara than Shriver does in *Kevin*. She agrees to go to Bali, but asks that her husband not accompany her and not wait for her if she returns. Higgins' text does not explore Cara's possible future as a woman who was once a mother but is currently

without a child. Instead, she poses a more "idealized" (O'Reilly "Patriarchal Motherhood" 64) thought:

> The thought of a new life growing in Ginie's womb filled her with piercing sadness and quiet hope. Will I ever have another child? She wondered, her heart aching. Not to replace Astrid. Never to fill the space she had vacated. But to love and to tend for its own sake, to walk alongside amid the capriciousness of life and, finally, to set it free. (301)

For *The Mothers' Group* to grapple with the uncertainty of life after motherhood would undermine the plot's focus on the community of women whose commonality is the raising of children. The novel focuses on the adjustment to the role of mother and the need for women to feel supported during this postpartum period. Cara's grief is too recent at the conclusion of the novel, and her future is beyond the scope of the narrative, but it raises interesting questions as to how this novel is limited in its ability to contend with the fraught negotiations between self as woman and self as mother. Higgins' novel poses the difficult question: is once a mother always a mother? Yet the narrative cannot imagine Cara as a character without giving her the possibility that she may be a mother again. Even Eva Khatchadourian leaves a spare bedroom made up for the possibility that Kevin might walk back into her life and resume his place as her live-in son (Shriver 468).

Perhaps the larger question that *The Mothers' Group* brings up in relation to the other texts in this chapter and to the themes of this chapter overall, is the critique of idealisation. It problematises the view that once a woman becomes a mother, this role is taken on for life in what O'Reilly terms the "essentialization of motherhood" ("Patriarchal Motherhood" 65). While there is a reliance on some conventional ideas regarding life-long motherhood, *The Mothers' Group* offers emergent qualities in its focus on the importance of a community of women despite Western notions of mothering as a solo, private and domestic engagement:

such community is evident in the words of Pippa, who tells the other women of the mothers' group "all of you are *my* village." (158). In foregrounding Made's story as a non-Western alternative to current mothering structures in Australia, *The Mothers' Group* can be read as offering a critique of the isolation of the mother in Western culture and the separation of mothering from the rest of the community.

Conclusion

My examination of the novels in this chapter shows that the representation of pregnancy, as demonstrated in both Sections 1 and 2, remains deeply indebted to dominant discourses of second-wave feminist thinking, which view childbearing as destructive to a woman's true self. There is a clear sense that an authentic life relies heavily on sexual freedom and the pursuit of creative individuality depicted through the protagonist's life before childbirth. Characters who pursue this freedom of sexuality and freedom of movement, however, are silenced in the narrative by madness or suicide. Mothers who transgress the "idealization" (O'Reilly "Patriarchal Motherhood" 64) of motherhood and wifehood appear voiceless and have no other place in fictional narratives other than the "narrative captivity" (Rogers 145) of eternal madness or death.

Across the five novels, some commonalities about the representation of pregnancy and the postpartum period can be found in the following narrative elements. First is the un-named narrator who fails as wife and mother. 'Wife' and 'mother' are key roles which identify this character. The role of wife is bound up with notions of duty and homely comfort. However, these concepts are only performed in public. The un-named characters lead a secret life of sexual fulfilment which cannot be found within the marriage. The house as symbol of domesticity feels physically oppressive and the upcoming childbirth leads to a crisis point that ends in madness or suicide.

The second commonality is the depiction of the mother without a mother. Each of these novels shows a young first-time mother isolated from other women in her family who may have supported or informed her transition to motherhood. *The Mothers' Group* and *The Hand That First Held Mine* show women separated from their mothers by geographical distance and by disagreement. The narrator's mother in *Bride* is invested in her career and while with her daughter at one critical time in her pregnancy, the bond is temporary. *Blue Skies* and *Breath* do not present any extended family for the protagonists. The narrator in *Blue Skies* appears to be supported by a well-meaning mother-in-law, but she finds her meddlesome and irritating. This lack of matrilineal support for the new mothers in these novels is a significant narrative technique. Isolated from other women who know them, the protagonists do not have access to successful models of wifehood or motherhood, nor any negotiation between their new roles and that of their previous life. These narratives are what O'Reilly calls "daughter-centric stories" ("Stories to Live By" 2). They are the stories of women becoming mothers without mothers of their own. They do not write in the maternal voice because they have not yet developed a maternal subjectivity. Successful matrescence then depends upon the protagonist creating their own understanding of what wife, but more crucially, what mother means to them. The suicides of many of these characters signify that the transition was not only unsuccessful, but impossible.

The third technique may be described as the disappearing woman, in which each text—except one, *The Mothers' Group*—has either killed off or erased their protagonist in some way. This removal is a telling commonality in this chapter. Failing their transition to motherhood, the narrative cannot be resolved. The mother moves from an uncertain presence in the narrative—hovering between woman and mother—to an absence in the text. Lexie, the unconventional single mother, drowns in the presence of her young son in *Hand*. *Bride*'s un-named narrator has disappeared with her young son, the only evidence of their circumstances

being a car and a pushchair at the top of a cliff. Eva finally takes her sexual games to their end point with her death in *Breath*, and the un-named narrator in *Blue Skies* lives but has completely lost her sanity. Of these novels that include the death of a mother, it is only in *Hand's* intersecting narrative of Elina and Ted that the presence of a new mother remains. Elina's harrowing near-death experience in birth seems to be the catalyst for a re-birth as mother. O'Farrell repeats images of water and drowning to describe both Lexie's death and Elina's "beginning to rise . . . to the surface" (139) of her transition to motherhood. Hodgman utilises images of murky water in *Blue Skies* but they too are images of drowning and threat. Her narrator is never able to get above the surface of the rage that has entrapped her into her domestic life, assuming the role of wife and mother and hiding the death of her neighbour.

The fourth commonality found across texts in this chapter is the concept of motherhood as embodied transition. The emphasis across these novels on the maternal flesh as a site of both pleasure and pain is another important aspect of contemporary literature on the maternal. All the novels utilise a common theme of sexual discovery. Pleasure is gained through intimacy with male partners, then juxtaposed with two representations of pain, the first being the physical pain associated with childbirth. This is most noted in *Hand* with Elina's slow and traumatic recovery. O'Farrell details the distressing physical changes that Elina notices in her body postpartum. *Blue Skies*, while not representing any specific birth scenes, has the narrator see disturbing visions—"the water flushed momentarily red, as if covered with a slick of afterbirth" (Hodgman 47)—and the death of the female turtle in birth. The second representation of pain is psychological. Time elapsing without purpose, and feelings of despair and anger exemplify the struggle to transition to motherhood. Eva in *Breath* and the narrator of *Blue Skies* are the most poignant examples of psychological despair. Their obsession with death is tinged with hopelessness. Neither woman can articulate her true desires about life before or after motherhood and are therefore depicted as trapped in

their desire to lose themselves in some way. Eva finds this through her auto-asphyxiation which eventually leads to her death. The narrator of *Blue Skies* loses her two lovers as well as Gloria in a short space of time which culminates in a spiraling descent into "pills" (Hodgman 150) and violent visions.

These four main narrative elements prove a strong inclination towards a representation of motherhood as loss, even within novels that celebrate the concept of matrescence. Stephens's findings in family studies have noted that loss seems to manifest itself in a desire for the previous life of paid work prior to the responsibilities of a family. It is loss presented in the difference between a public life and the domestic life. The examination of literature presented in this chapter shows that 'loss' is a multi-layered term, understood only when it is placed alongside matrescence. This loss is both profoundly physical and psychological. It is isolating and entrapping, causing a re-valuation of what motherhood means as loss of individuality and freedom and the connections of this kind of loss to wifehood and domesticity. Loss occurs most poignantly when matrescence has failed. Failure to successfully move into the role of 'mother' leaves one at risk of erasure, death and disappearance.

The novels presented in this chapter show a clear concern regarding successful mothering and an acknowledgement of the real possibility of failing to become that success. New motherhood is depicted as a tense and anxious phase of life in these late twentieth and early twenty-first-century texts, reinforcing what Freidan found in her research (18) that made women feel like "I don't exist" (18). In contrast, emergent qualities and the representation of new, confident motherhood can be seen in the depiction of Elina in O'Farrell's *Hand* and the six women of Higgins' *The Mothers' Group.* These characters have experienced success where other characters have failed, by bracing themselves for challenges and meeting them step by step in their quest to successfully negotiate their past and future

selves as both women and mothers. This new, confident motherhood has been represented as part of a family including women in the example of *Hand*, or part of a female friendship group as in *The Mothers' Group*. This leads me to conclude that the concept of female-to-female familial relationships and friendships might be demonstrative of new, emergent qualities in fiction that represent successful matrescence.

CHAPTER 3 CAPTIVE LABOUR: CHILDBIRTH

Dominant, Residual and Emergent Representations of Childbirth

The concept of "dominant" (Williams, "Base and Superstructure" 9), "residual" and "emergent" (10) remains my overarching framework to discuss the representation of childbirth, although the main techniques and tropes that are identified in this chapter are very different to the discussions of Chapter 2. The previous chapter on the representation of pregnancy in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century fiction pointed to an overall concern with "matrescence" (Raphael 66) and the inability of many new mothers to successfully transition from independent womanhood to new motherhood. Motherhood was often defined as "loss" (Stephens, "Beyond Binaries" 91) and the consequence of madness or suicide awaited many characters who were not able to achieve successful matrescence by the end of the narrative. The image of the fallen woman in Victorian-era plots had, by the late twentieth century, remained a dominant representation of women who fail at being ideal wives and mothers. Narratives that run counter to these dominant representations could then be defined as possessing emergent qualities which, over time and across many literary representations, will create new narratives of motherhood for the twenty-first century. In this chapter, my analysis will show that some novels do engage in emergent techniques while others reinforce dominant representations.

According to Andrew Milner, in Williams' concept of dominance, "Hegemony is never in principle either uncontested or absolute, but is only ever an unstable equilibrium, ultimately open to contestation by alternative social forces" (Milner, *Cultural Materialism* 54). This chapter aims to provide insight into dominant trends among western representations of childbirth in the mid-twentieth century, according to scholars Carol H. Poston and Tess Cosslett. After summarising their findings, this chapter offers an analysis of a selection of

birth scenes and novels that focus on childbirth to highlight what is at work as late twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors contest and negotiate recurring assumptions about the literary representation of childbirth. Cultural beliefs are "reproductive" (Milner, *Cultural Materialism* 65), recurring across time periods, and therefore an examination of a selection of contemporary narratives that feature childbirth should find several recurring images, representations or points of view that suggest a culturally dominant way of seeing maternity and the physical act of childbirth in a literary representation emanating from an earlier twentieth century form. In the scope of this chapter, "reproductive" (65) has two forms of meaning, that which pertains to the reproductive work of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding, and that which refers to the repetition of particular ways of perceiving the maternal body. This chapter outlines the framework for establishing dominant ideas about childbirth in literature through Poston and Cosslett's work on twentieth century novels, then expands upon their work by applying their theories to novels and short stories written after 1980. Poston's research examines the way literary representations of birthing women fall into reductive categories of animal, heroine or schizoid. Cosslett's research explores the ways in which women writers have placed value on or critiqued medical and natural models of childbirth. Her work has a wider scope than Poston's and was written considering Poston's pioneering attempts to create a typology of birth in literature.

Dramatic shifts in the representation of childbirth from the late twentieth through to the early twenty-first century would imply that literature featuring maternity has reached an emergent stage of pursuing new and counter-cultural ideas about the physical and emotional work of birth. However, a series of more subtle shifts and recurrent uses of images seen as dominant in twentieth-century texts and reproduced in twenty-first century publications would imply a more ingrained hegemonic view of childbirth that has progressed little over the decades. It may be expected that dominant twentieth-century images eventually become

utilised as residual ideas about maternity as the twenty-first-century progresses and as writers find newer ways to explore childbirth in their fiction. In undertaking this research, I have found that while writers are employing several techniques to contest and negotiate notions of childbirth, the representation of childbirth has not entered a fully emergent stage of innovation but remains heavily dependent on earlier forms. This reliance is centred upon notions of the physically grotesque display of the female body, or the notion that the birthing mother is a heroine for overcoming the physical suffering of childbirth. All the narratives selected for close examination in this chapter utilise the discourse of either the medical model of childbirth or the natural model of childbirth, as outlined by Cosslett in her 1994 text *Women Writing Childbirth*. This chapter aims to expand on the work of both Cosslett and Poston, as well as to show the changes and transmutations of their categories in the work of established late twentieth-century and early twentieth-century literary authors, such as Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Tim Winton, Emma Donoghue and Peter Carey, alongside the works of writers whose narratives are marketed as women's fiction, such as Ami McKay and Patricia Ferguson. A notable addition in my research is the use of some Australian authors, such as Tim Winton and Peter Carey, in a field of research that is dominated by scholarship on American, Canadian and British fiction. This chapter explores dominant images of birthing women from the early twentieth century, current residual portrayals of childbirth and newer, emergent examples of fiction about birth.

"When we do find examples of birth, why is the experience so rarely that of the birthing woman; in other words, where is the authentic voice?" wrote Carol H. Poston in *Feminist Studies* for a special 1978 issue titled "Towards a Feminist Theory of Motherhood" (20). In her key work of late twentieth-century scholarship on the literary representation of childbirth, Poston surveyed birth scenes in literary fiction from the 1920s through to the mid-1970s by both male and female authors, seeking the "story that is rarely, if ever, told" (20).

Her findings were that "although the experience has been woman's, the language has been men's . . . from the point of view of the observer rather than that of the birth participant" (20). In closely analysing some examples of birthing scenes in twentieth-century novels, short stories and poetry, Poston developed a summary of three common types of depictions of birthing women. She argued that male authors began traditions of depicting birth from an observer's point of view in certain ways that female authors copied to an extent, although slight "refinements" (21) were noticed. However, these traditions deny women a voice to express their actual experiences and limit the language available to accurately represent these experiences from their point of view.

Poston was concerned literature that reinforced the idea that birth was an isolating and terrible experience that was presented as "an act for an audience" (29) gave women a false and hopeless sense of what the experience might be for them. More importantly, the reinforcement of these attitudes gave women "that sense of shame which we see as pervasive in women's attitudes towards their bodies" (29). My analysis of several novels written in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries firstly look for representations of childbirth that mirror Poston's categories in order to see if these attitudes towards women's birthing bodies have indeed been cemented into literary representations of childbirth beyond the twentieth century. My analysis will also be bringing to light representations of childbirth that do not easily fall into Poston's categories, thereby expanding upon her work by arguing that there are some "emergent" qualities in the texts presented in this chapter.

The scholarship undertaken by Poston theorised a series of commonalties in the depiction of birthing women. She categorised these scenes into three main "traditions" (21), which will form the framework for my analysis of texts published in the following decades, in order to argue that although these categories have experienced changes and mutations, there remains some aspects of these residual images in twenty-first-century literary

representations of childbirth. Poston identified two trends: the birthing woman being depicted as animal or savage, and the birthing woman as heroine. A further refinement of these occurred when female writers depicted the birthing woman as "schizoid" (21), where her rational self is split into two parts, the animal birthing self and the rational observing self.

The most common representation of the birthing woman was found by Poston to be written by male authors. She termed this tradition "savage" and described the birth scenes in these novels as "savage, barbaric, primitive or loathsome" (21). Émile Zola is given the title of "father of that tradition" (21) for his work in the novel *La Terre* (1955), which parallels the scene of human childbirth with a calving cow. Also considered in this tradition was Ernest Hemingway's short story "Indian Camp" (1972) and Norwegian female novelist Sigrid Undset, who is credited by Poston with utilising Zola's savage tradition but adding an element of "beast" (22) to the depiction of the birthing woman by a narrator who stands apart from the scene. The births in these literary examples dehumanise the female characters and deny them their ability to be understood by others. The birthing woman was changed to an unrecognisable degree by the pain and torture of labour and birth, which filled those watching and narrating the event with horror.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* assists to pinpoint the development of Poston's horrified onlookers of childbirth. The abject is that which invokes horror and disgust, is considered unclean, repulsive or reminds us of the closeness of decay and death. Kristeva nominates spoilt food, bodily wastes, corpses and the maternal body as having abject qualities. While many of these things are linked to the decay and disease of the physical body, it is the maternal as abject that helps to illuminate the horror that Poston identified in her research into the representation of childbirth in the twentieth century. The abject is that which disrupts "the self's clean and proper body" (Kristeva 72) and the border between oneself and others. Clean and proper point not just to a physical

border between self and other as healthy and ordered, but to a subject that is capable of speech and autonomy, of being whole, who is not at risk of being devoured by the overwhelming facets of another. Literary representations of pregnancy and childbirth, as discussed by Poston, can be described as placing emphasis on "the . . . abject inside of the maternal body" (Kristeva 54). The fascination and repulsion of the workings of the maternal body create "the image of birth as a violent act of expulsion" (101) from which, Kristeva writes, "the subject then gives birth to himself" (101) in the development of a growing sense of self-awareness, understanding and independence. Childbirth can be viewed in this psychoanalytic framework as an event that draws close attention to the dependence of subjectivity and autonomy on the maternal body, a body that in childbirth is seen to have both violent and strange workings, that blurs the boundaries between the child within and the child outside. It can be seen as a psychic battle between the maternal body to expel and the child to gain independence. Kristeva points to the work of Mary Douglas' 1966 text, *Purity and Danger,* which illuminates the role of feminine fluids such as menstruation in the creation of social taboos. Childbirth can be seen as a physical assault on social mores that expect clear boundaries between self and other (Ruddick 190-91) and the containment of feminine fluids of reproduction.

The second tradition according to Poston was the representation of the birthing mother as heroine. Birth was the crowning moment of her life as a woman. In particular, a woman birthing alone or unassisted showed a courage and self-sufficiency that elevated her status among the other characters: "If boys become men by their initiation into sex, then women become heroic in literature often through the act of giving birth" (Poston 27). Examples of novels in this tradition between 1920 and 1970 are Sinclair Lewis' *Ann Vickers* (1933) and Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall* (1969). Poston also wrote of the atmosphere of death that can pervade birth scenes in literature. Most likely a remnant from times of high

foetal and maternal death rates in childbirth, these scenes draw a strong link between birth and the threat of the mother's or infant's death. This representation of birth was again most likely to be written by a third-person narrator.

The third category was the schizoid or split self. Here, the scene was narrated from the birthing woman's point of view by a female author, but her narration was split between her physical, animalistic experience of the birth and her rational view of herself: "wherein the woman feels the agony of birth as an event that tears her into two selves, one watching the other" (21). Poston writes that this is an "especial female refinement . . . the rational self is reflecting on the irrational or demonic self, another kind of audience response in which one part of the self is looking at the other" (22). Again, there is a clear sense of someone observing the birth and the birthing woman feeling the power of this observation as a distraction.

Poston's framework is a useful starting point to discuss the changing representations of childbirth from the late twentieth century, particularly as she claims that "birth from the audience rather than the participant point of view is nearly universal" (20-21). Her scholarship summarises the key aspects of dominant (Williams, "Base and Superstructure" 13) notions of childbirth as it was in the mid-twentieth century. It is an event that evokes horror in its onlookers; it changes the women involved into an unrecognisable animal or beast, it requires immense suffering for the woman involved and it carries the threat of death. For those who successfully endure it, childbirth ends with a sense of heroism and status, although little or no mention is made of the infant themselves.

In my analysis of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century examples of childbirth in literature, I explore the key elements of Poston's framework. How isolated is the birthing woman? Who is looking on and whose point of view frames the scene? Is there terror, horror

or disgust involved? Who experiences these emotions: the onlooker or the birthing woman? Does the birth scene make the woman a hero in the eyes of others?

In addition to the framework proposed by Poston's work, my method uses the concept of the representation of childbirth as a binary developed by Tess Cosslett. Expanding on Poston's ideas about the representation of childbirth, Cosslett's *Women Writing Childbirth* explored both "canonical" (6) and new women's writing from British, American and Commonwealth literature. Cosslett's text examined writing across the genres of novel, short story, poetry and life writing to explore the binary between the medical discourse of childbirth and the discourse of the natural childbirth movement in literature and life writing of the twentieth century. Her analyses of novels such as Enid Bagnold's *The Squire (1938),* Fay Weldon's 1980 novel *Puffball, A Proper Marriage* by Doris Lessing (1954), A.S. Byatt's *Still Life* (1985) and the short story "Giving Birth" by Margaret Atwood in *Dancing Girls* (1977) examines how writers use a variation of critique, inversion and reinforcement of two key images of birth: the "primitive" (15) woman and the "peasant crone" (38). I am interested in analysing how the primitive, heroine and onlooker are manifested in births described within the medical discourse and births that are set within more natural or home-like environments.

The concept of the primitive women is described by Cosslett as emerging from European writing on "The Noble Savage" (10), which was then cemented into medical birthing literature by obstetrician Dr Grantly Dick-Read in his 1933 text *Natural Childbirth*. His observations of a non-specific African woman who births unattended among bushes, and apparently without pain or trouble, became a reference point in the medical literature about natural childbirth with minimal medical intervention. Cosslett's method of literary analysis looks at "female appropriation" (15) of this image and how some authors challenge it in their novels and short stories, while others still use it to make certain critiques about some aspects

of both natural and medicalised birthing models. Her text moves away from the analysis of "observer" (Poston 20) of births, as mentioned in Poston, to the exploration of how women writers craft the birth experience from the mother's perspective in their creative work.

Cosslett's theory of the "peasant crone" stereotype' (38) stems from the figure of the medieval midwife or elderly female village healer described by Adrienne Rich in her text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Working within literary texts, Cosslett has found that this stereotype can, in some instances, be "not the 'native woman' but the 'witch'" (33) and she described literary examples of both helpful crone figures and malevolent ones. This figure has wisdom about a woman's birthing body, which may or may not be helpful to the birthing mother and seems to work as a sub-category of the primitive woman, in much the same way as Poston's "schizoid" is a sub-category that combines elements of both the "animal" and "heroine" (Poston 21).

Poston's three categories occur across Cosslett's exploration of literature that features both the medical and natural models of birth, yet interestingly, it is the heroine that is a very common manifestation in birth writing by women, as they explore creative interpretations of both medical and natural childbirth through their writing. Some of the selected fiction analysed in this chapter reinforce hegemonic understandings of Western birth practices and contribute to dominant cultural understandings of childbirth. By dominant, I refer to childbirth scenes in hospital settings, where the woman is attended by medical staff and the birth itself is seen as a physiological event requiring supervision by experts. Hospital births in Australia accounted for 97% of all births in 2019 (AIHW), while in the United States only 1.61% of births in 2017 were "out-of-hospital" (McDorman and Declercq) and in England and Wales the combined rate of homebirths was 2.4% of all births in 2020 (ONS); the medical model is by far the most common birth setting for women living in these countries in the twenty-first century.

In Section 1, this chapter will examine how key representations of birth scenes from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century utilise this dominant medical framework of the hospital birth, or else it will work within the discourse of natural birth and consider the extent to which these examples might mirror the prevalence of the medical model. Although the medical model of childbirth is the one most dominant in Western culture and as a lived experience for mothers, the examples of fiction present in this chapter show a small but growing number of texts that critique the medical model and advocate for a return to home-birthing and the elevation of the role of midwife. There is a strong sense, in these texts, of the re-writing of these dominant images of childbirth, where the home as a place for birth is not a place of horror or death but a haven from the medicalised model. The emphasis on the safety of home is the residual manifestation of dominant narratives set within hospitals, when viewed across the historical development of maternity care. Births were traditionally attended in the home by a local midwife. The advent of the field of obstetrics and the creation of specialist maternity hospitals soon became the dominant setting for childbirth among the middle and upper classes in Europe and the United States since the late 17th century (Kitzinger; Cassidy). The following fictional texts place emphasis on the location and context of the birthing experience, both hospital and home. The plots draw attention to the impact of these locations on the safety and care provided to the mother.

The texts examined in Section 1 are grouped thematically and are discussed in the following order:

The short story ‘Neighbours’ from the collection *Scission* by Tim Winton (1985)

The Midwife’s Daughter by Patricia Ferguson (2012)

The Birth House by Ami Mckay (2006)

Poston and Cosslett’s frameworks for the literary analysis of birth scenes are useful for the following examination of a selection of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century

fiction that represents birth and the role of the midwife. There are some examples of birth scenes discussed in this chapter that engage with ideas of the birthing woman as heroine or animal, to use Poston's terms, while other texts more broadly encompass ideas around childbirth as an experience within a binary of the natural and the medical model. Each text does not fall neatly into any category but are rich examples of a range of fiction that deals with the representation of childbirth. I have placed them into two main thematic sections: childbirth in Section 1 which explores notions of home, safety, naturalness and the role of the midwife. Section 2 examines texts which depict birthing women in situations of threat and violence, often in isolation, birthing under conditions which limit their physical and emotional needs. The texts examined in Section 2 are:

Room by Emma Donoghue (2010)

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood (1985)

The Tax Inspector by Peter Carey (1991)

Beloved by Toni Morrison (1987)

Section 3 contains a single text, *The Girls* (2006) by Canadian author Lori Lansens. This novel is set apart from the fiction presented in the previous two sections due to its rejection of dominant representations of the birthing woman and its engagement with narrative techniques that I define as possessing "emergent" qualities. *The Girls* challenges hegemonic assumptions of childbirth and provides a new way of interpreting the pregnant and birthing body.

Section 1: Birthing at Home: Midwives, Doctors and Women

The following analysis of one short story and two novels focus on the way that the 'home' has been re-appropriated to become a safe place to birth, away from unnecessary medical intervention and obtrusive male obstetricians. The safety of home is demonstrated primarily through the care of a midwife attending the birth and contrasted with the lack of care

demonstrated by male doctors. The midwife has become a popular figure in recent publications. Before I discuss the figure of the midwife in two examples of contemporary historical fiction, it is worth mentioning the popularity of this figure in Jennifer Worth's three-volume memoir of life as midwife in post-war London, *Call the Midwife* (2002); the texts have since become a televised PBS series of the same name. Republished in 2007 was the 1990 text *A Wise Birth: Bringing Together the Best of Natural Childbirth and Modern Medicine* by Penny Armstrong and Sheryl Feldman, who had also published their own memoir of work as midwives in their 1986 text *A Midwife's Story*. Following on from the interest in maternity care and birth stories have come texts such as *Midwife: A Calling (Memoirs of an Urban Midwife)* in 2015 by Peggy Vincent. The changing role of the midwife is clearly of interest to publishers and readers, as not only has the work of midwives been told through the genre of the memoir but also as novels of historical fiction.

Late twentieth-century examples of the figure of the midwife in fiction are not as numerous as in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Aside from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and discussed in this chapter, there is Chris Bohjalian's 1997 novel *Midwives* that rose in international bestseller lists when Oprah Winfrey selected if for her "Book Club" in 1998 (E. Miller). Among those twenty-first-century publications from the genre of historical fiction are Patricia Ferguson's *The Midwife's Daughter* (2012) and Ami McKay's *The Birth House* (2006), which will both be the subject of analysis in this chapter as examples of historical fiction that represent birthing women and their relationship with midwives. In 2015, the first book in *The Midwife Series* by Jodi Daynard was published, set in 1888 Boston at the time of civil conflict and titled *The Midwife's Revolt*, as well as Australian author Sally Hepworth's novel *Secrets of Midwives*. Also in the same year was the publication of *The Mountain Midwife* by Laurie Alice Eakes about several generations of midwives within the same family. This is a brief survey of the topic of midwifery as it has

appeared in fiction published in North America, Great Britain and Australia in the last four decades. There are numerous titles not mentioned here that fall into the romantic and Christian fiction genres, beyond the scope of this chapter, but I mention this to provide an overview of the wealth of representation in fiction and memoir of the role of the midwife. This figure holds manifestations of the "crone" (Cosslett 38) or "witch" (33) and remains popular. An analysis of its contemporary manifestations offers insight into newer meanings written into this figure by more recent authors.

Understanding a summary of changes to the management of childbirth is necessary to appreciate the links between societal concerns around birth, the changing role of the midwife, and literary representations. Childbirth across all cultures was traditionally a woman-centred experience: a woman birthed at home or in a specially prepared birthing place, surrounded by a midwife or similarly experienced woman, with chosen female friends or relatives. The role of these women was supporting the birthing woman physically and emotionally while also providing practical assistance to the midwife. Pain relief may have been offered in some cultures through herbal mixtures, but their results varied (Kitzinger 9-13). From the late 1800s, male physicians attempted to gain access to birthing women as patients and a widespread movement among European physicians to develop a field of obstetrics began (Cassidy 39-53). It was these physicians who experimented with early designs of forceps, c-section surgery and analgesia (Cassidy 135-37, 105-18, 83-90). Gradually, obstetrics was seen as a more technologically advanced field, and the fashion among upper-class women moved from being assisted by a midwife to assistance by an obstetrician. Eventually, obstetricians moved from delivering babies in the homes of the women to having the women come to hospital in the newly developed maternity wards. As Tina Cassidy observes in *Birth: A History*, the move from homebirths to hospital births was disastrous for women and their babies. High numbers of newly delivered mothers died from what was termed childbed fever

that was later discovered to be caused by the unwashed hands of physicians as they moved between patients (Cassidy 57-62; Dally 31-38). With the advancement of germ theory in medicine and better sanitation, hospitals took in increasing numbers of female patients and eventually lowered the original rates of maternal and infant mortality.

Once hospital births had become established as the norm for the wealthy, women began to call for the right to be released from the agony of labour. The movement gained strength and analgesia was used not just to relieve pain but to render women unconscious during birth so that they would not have any recollection of the horrors of birthing pain. Babies were mostly pulled out by forceps, allowing the physician total control of the birth. By the 1920s most births occurred using the Twilight Sleep method, rendering the women unconscious with scopolamine once contractions were four minutes apart (Cassidy 91-93).

Not surprisingly, groups of women and some physicians including British doctor Grantly Dick-Read, were cautious about this widespread technique and called for a change where women were awake and active in labour, having only minimal pain relief in order to birth their babies without unnecessary instrumental intervention and to minimise the side effects of these drugs on the infant. This movement gained force in the 1970s and became known as the natural childbirth movement, with physicians such as Dr Fernand Lamaze encouraging women's active participation in medication-free vaginal births with the assistance of their male partners (Cassidy 146-58). This movement was, at times, met with resistance by maternity hospitals, but persistence by various advocates and lobby groups across Western nations over the decades meant changes have been made to make maternity hospitals more woman-centred and supportive of women's needs during birth (Kitzinger 46-54). There is still an active natural childbirth movement in these nations, working towards greater reform in hospitals, better access to homebirths and a wider dissemination of birth information for women.

A close look at selected texts in Section 1 reveals that concerns around women's relationships to male power and control in birth has been reflected in the stories told by that generation of writers. While remaining consistent to the conventions of the savage and the heroine, these texts have also problematised and mutated these images, and in doing so they have revealed new ways of understanding how birth scenes in fiction can comment on societal attitudes towards childbirth and women's labouring bodies.

"Neighbours" Tim Winton (1985)

Tim Winton's short story "Neighbours" from the collection *Scission* (1985) is the narrative of a young, un-named Australian couple who move to a suburb where "the street was full of European migrants. It made the newly-weds feel like sojourners in a foreign land" (81). The opening paragraphs document how "relations were uncomfortable for many months" (81) until mutual understanding and respect slowly grew between those living in the same street. An initial reading of this story may focus on the theme of multiculturalism and the developing harmony between people who place different values on family life. It is the inclusion of a homebirth as the climax of this narrative by a prolific and recognised Australian author that draws this short story into the selection of fiction examined in this chapter.

A third-person narrator is used to give the husband's point of view. It initially sets up the contrast between the couple and their neighbours: "The young man sensed their disapproval at his staying home to write his thesis while his wife worked" (81-82). The young couple eventually earn the approval of their neighbours by clearing rubbish from their garden, planting vegetables, keeping ducks and sharing food with others in surrounding homes. It is in turning from his academic interests to the practical, outdoor work involved on his property that "the young man" (81) is able to connect with his neighbours. Despite his efforts, it is his

wife who is "bold enough" (82) to be the first to make physical contact with the neighbours, and this eases tension between all groups, the neighbours taking her contact as an invitation to be more involved in the couple's lives. The narrator's wife is framed with traditional male attributes from the outset of the narrative. She works outside of the home and is confident in meeting new people. Her husband, in contrast, works clearly inside the home, cooking for the couple (82), and his social connection to others is placed within this neighbourhood.

The neighbours are joyful when they see the couple are expecting their first baby, despite the husband's initial reaction that "they had not planned on a pregnancy. It stunned them" (83). When "labour came abruptly" (84), the narrator again reminds us of the physical and emotional attributes of the wife who "hoisted her belly about the house, supervising his movements" in comparison to her husband who "ran around making statements that sounded like queries" (84). Winton alludes briefly to the fact that she works in a hospital: "He . . . listened to her stories of eccentric patients and hospital incompetence" (82). In this simple quotation, Winton sets up a contrast between the cosiness and safety of the home as a place to birth and the couple's mistrust of the hospital system. A midwife arrives on the scene, but she is a silent figure in the drama between a husband, his wife and his neighbours. The midwife is referred to twice: first, "His wife began to blacken the stove. The midwife came and helped her finish the job" (84) and at the climax of the story:

> Her belly rose, uterus flexing downward. Her sweat sparkled, the gossamer highlit by movement and firelight. The night grew older. The midwife crooned. The young man rubbed his wife's back, fed her ice and rubbed her lips with oil. And then came the pushing. He caressed and stared and tried not to shout. The floor trembled as the young woman bore down in a squat. He felt the power of her, the sophistication of her. She strained. Her face mottled. She kept at it, push after push, assaulting some unseen barrier, until suddenly it was smashed and she was through. (84)

Strikingly different to the birth scenes examined by Poston, Winton's observing characters are the silent midwife and an awed husband who actively participates in the birth experience. There is no horrified onlooker here: the husband's care for her is practical and sensual as well, in the way he touches her back, lips and mouth. This sensuality is reminiscent of the advice of childbirth educators such as Ina May Gaskin and Sarah J. Buckley for couples to engage in gentle physical intimacy during labour to relax the mother and assist the progression of contractions (Mayberry and Daniels 331). These writings place emphasis on the role of the male partner to provide physical comfort and not shy away from expressing desire. Winton's text offers a literary example of this, as well as the example of a positive experience of homebirth when a medicalised birth could have been an option. The husband views his wife admiringly as she works calmly with her labour in the absence of obstetricians, electronic monitors and surgical instruments—the "technocratic birth culture" that Sheila Kitzinger spoke so vehemently against (Kitzinger 2)—and well away from the "hospital incompetence" (Winton 82) that the couple know exists. The setting is twentieth-century yet rustic, with a traditional wood stove inside and ducks and vegetables in the garden outside. It is a suburban setting with a semi-rural atmosphere, pointing to earlier times when homebirth would have been assisted by female neighbours and local midwives.

In Winton's story, the wife is clearly an example of Poston's heroine, and the birth is related from the point of view of the male observer. However, the heroine in this narrative is not due to the value placed on motherhood, as Poston surmised; rather, Winton's text engages with the ideas of the naturalness and physicality of the birth process as an experience that carries power for the woman, so much power that it is obvious to those who witness it. The contrast is clear between the quiet, bookish husband and his wife. It is she who initiates contact with their neighbours that begin a breakdown of the language "barrier" (84) between them, and then again in the act of childbirth the husband sees his wife as a person of "power"

who overcomes obstacles by being “bold” (82), by “assaulting” whatever comes her way until it is “smashed” (84). She is heroic in his eyes even before the experience of childbirth, but it is through observing the physical work of labour and birth that the husband truly understands her potential for power.

Winton describes this power of the un-named wife with traditional male attributes of strength in contrast to the passivity of the husband. Part of the confidence that the husband describes in his wife would come from the couple’s ability to choose between homebirth and a hospital birth. Pamela Klassen’s research into North American childbirth call this a “middle-class . . . privilege to critique biomedicine knowing that they can turn to it if necessary” (Klassen 72). Winton’s story assumes the financial and educational resources needed for this couple to find and pay for a private midwife, and to be able to organise transport to hospital if necessary. This homebirth is set within the framework of a simple but comfortable suburban life. Winton’s description of birth within the safety of the home has also been found to be a representation common in historical fiction about the role of midwife.

The following two examples from authors Patricia Ferguson and Ami McKay expand on the contrast Winton sets up between home and hospital to explore concerns about women’s care in childbirth. Power is played out differently in these texts, as there are marked variations in affluence, education and resources. In the following examples, homebirth is a far more female-only experience, with women in the role of midwives and men in the role of doctors. “Neighbours” perhaps sets up an ideal birth scene for a late twentieth-century audience: the couple work in harmony with the midwife and the outcome is a safe and joyous arrival of a new baby. The new parents are informed participants in the birth and their new family is celebrated by the wider community in which they live. This idealism is critiqued in several texts across both Sections 1 and 2, where women birth in less-than-ideal circumstances and there are genuine conflicts about the best approach to maternal care and

often a disregard for the mother's safety. The prevalence of critical descriptions of childbirth and maternal care across novels in this chapter point to concerns authors are expressing regarding the attitudes towards the birthing body and the emotional needs of women during childbirth.

The Midwife's Daughter Patricia Ferguson (2012)

The Midwife's Daughter was written by English nurse and midwife, Patricia Ferguson. Some of her fiction is inspired by her first career; her collection of short stories about nursing titled *Indefinite Nights* was published in 1988, and a sequel to *The Midwife's Daughter* entitled *Aren't We Sisters*? (2014) discusses abortion and contraceptive practices in the same fictional English town of Silkhampton a decade after the plot of *The Midwife's Daughter*.

In *The Midwife's Daughter,* the concept of childbirth at home operates not only as a physical space, but a space that encompasses respect for female knowledge of the maternal body and birthing knowledge that has been passed down through generations. The plot explores the change in maternity care prior to the First World War in a fictional countryside town. The narrative perspective is of Violet Dimond, a local woman who acts as untrained midwife or "handywoman" (136) to her fellow villagers. She carries out her role on a needs basis to local families who cannot afford the fees of obstetrician Dr Summers, and she uses her gifts of cash or food to supplement her income. She was trained by her mother, who learnt the trade from Violet's grandmother. Violet reluctantly abandons her work attending births for fear of reprisals by the new Central Midwives Board (97). She is not literate enough to undertake the new training required to become "properly certified" (96) and cannot afford the fees. She sees the poorest families in the local area without payment in emergencies, but her livelihood is taken up by newly trained nurses. When she becomes the adoptive mother of a "negro" (5) orphan named Grace in the same year as the change in requirements for

midwives, the novel moves to the various opinions of the villagers as Violet's social standing in Silkhampton changes dramatically. While the poor are grateful for her practical assistance during birth, the increasing middle class are wary of her traditional techniques amid the rising status of the new midwives and the building of a new maternity hospital.

Of interest to my analysis of the representation of childbirth in *The Midwife's Daughter* is the use of contrasting scenes of childbirth and the ways in which each birth scene offers a perspective that reiterates the safety and woman-centred care of the homebirth by a midwife. The first birth scene in the novel has comic overtones and occupies half of the second chapter. Its detail demonstrates Violet's approach to childbirth and the appropriate way she believes birthing women should behave. Assisted by the bumbling and overly enthusiastic landlady, Violet easily asserts a quiet authority in this situation, spending time carefully watching the birthing Mrs Quick in order to anticipate the moment of delivery.

> Rosie begins heaving and groaning again, louder and louder, sagging in the landlady's arms . . . This time the groans sharpen into screaming; Mrs. Dimond sips her tea.
>
> 'Best back on the bed, I think,' she says, when she can be heard again. 'You got a wet cloth for her head?' (19)

The labour is long, and Violet's most obvious traits are calm, patience and an attitude of detachment. She sips her tea and waits, not disturbing the atmosphere in the room, and only reassuring the birthing woman with measured words on occasion.

> 'Am I dying? I'm dying, aren't I . . .' Her voice trails away into a squeak of tearfulness.
>
> 'Course not,' says Mrs. Dimond sharply, for she regards this sort of thing as impious, as well as slack-fibred. Where was the woman's pride? (21, ellipsis in original).

While Violet believes in unemotional care and values feminine propriety in the birthing woman, her constant objective attention at the mother's side is directly contrasted in the

climax of the novel, which tells of the labour and childbirth of Violet's now adult adopted daughter Grace. Grace's care is moved from various health professionals as the emergency escalates and her mother is sidelined by hospital staff due to her lack of training. When Mrs Quick finally gives all signs that the baby is about to be born, Violet simply requests the mother to "'lie on your left side, and let the Lord deliver you" (21). God features prominently in this scene as being the ultimate authority on all births, even those that Violent attends: "It does not occur to her to carry out any sort of examination. She's heard of them. But what goes on inside a labouring woman is God's business, and not hers." (21). On her way home from this particular birth, Violet stops by a church, "as usual for a moment of communicative quiet. The birth had been a gift, and she must show proper gratitude" (29). Ferguson repeats the use of contrast in the last birth scene of the novel in which Grace's infant son survives but she does not. The child is not able to be delivered naturally but by forceful extraction, which causes the internal injuries that lead to Grace's death. Ferguson demonstrates the two sides of childbirth, life and death, very clearly in this novel.

Throughout the narrative, both Violet and Grace are horrified to hear of many young Silkhampton men who have met their deaths on the battlefields of the First World War. Each youth is remembered by Violet as one she delivered. On hearing of the death of twin brothers, Violet is particularly grieved as she remembers how it was her skill as a midwife that ensured the smaller of the twins, the unexpected "footling breech" (157) survived childbirth. The novel concludes a few years after Grace's death, with the village gathered in the town centre for the opening of a memorial statue to the fallen men of Silkhampton. Grace's husband Joe and their young son Barty is there, but "Grace Dimond had vanished, and for most already it was as if she had never been. For others, death in childbirth had given her memory a certain romance, almost a glamour" (390). Ferguson highlights how deaths based on sacrifice, either that of a mother giving birth or a soldier giving his life for his country, both create a false

sense of "glamour" in the young who do not have the life experience to see the real tragedy. *The Midwife's Daughter* shows the darker side to joy, where bringing new life can lead to death, love and hope can easily be crushed by anger and war, and racial differences can both divide and unite.

Scenes of childbirth in *The Midwife's Daughter* offer a rich literary opportunity to explore the binary of life and death, and Ferguson's novel has some interesting inclusions in the birth experience of Mrs Quick in the early chapters of the novel, which share commonalities with Poston's bestial category:

> With the next pain the nape of the child's neck at last clears the narrow way, and the gates part, the mother screams once, and the whole head rises, goes on rising, and at last comes free. Now a strange compound beast lies on the bed: a panting woman, her nightdress folded up to her breasts, and down between her parted legs someone else's slick, wet, drowned little head, face-down (25).

Ferguson's "beast" (25) is the point of interconnection between mother and infant, visible for the first time to those outside their relationship. It is the point of the entrance of new life, and a uniquely transitional stage, where the two-in-one model of pregnancy is about to end, and two separate individuals will emerge, although the death of one or both remains a reality. Violet's perspective when witnessing this scene is to "show proper gratitude" (32) for the birthing process. Her calm, wise serenity in experiencing childbirth is directly contrasted in the last section of the novel, when Grace's labour is told from her husband's Joe's perspective of "the terrible pain" (387):

> by the late afternoon of the second day she could bear it no longer, and began at last to groan with each return of it . . . he had heard her, heard the first one, and the hairs on the nape of his neck had risen with horror . . . hours later, with three pints inside him and still stone-cold sober, they had come back along the quiet streets and heard

> her long thick deep-throated scream. A No-Man's-Land scream, a mindless involuntary animal sound, that made him sweat, brought the beer back up . . . the first time Joe had caught sight of her that day as they carried her down the stairs between them, the rag of half-conscious creature. (359-360)

Joe was a wounded soldier who met Grace while she was working in the kitchen of a convalescent hospital, and Joe's experience of hearing his wife's labour is an all too familiar model of the literary "traditions" Poston noted in her research on twentieth-century birth scenes. Joe equates childbirth with a battlefield. His wife is reduced to a "creature" (Ferguson 388) by the pain and he is unable to recognise this "rag" (388) when he first lays eyes on her. Joe's narrative fits neatly into Poston's first tradition of birth "from the audience . . . view" and an experience that appears to be "barbaric . . . or loathsome" (Poston 20-21) to the observer. Ferguson interrupts this narrative of Joe recalling Grace's traumatic childbirth in 1919 with excerpts from the professional midwives' medical report which tell their version of events. The first report states that Grace's mother Violet:

> who was already well known to me as a trouble-maker with very inflated notions as to her own medical expertise . . . had decided almost with onset of labour that Mrs. Gilder would be unable to bear her child safely and had wasted no time in communicating this idea to her unfortunate daughter. (360).

Upon realising that these midwives are not listening to Violet's concerns about the deteriorating condition of her daughter, she immediately sends for Dr Summers, but he is unavailable. A new doctor enters the scene and Grace is rushed to hospital where Dr Heyward delivers the baby with forceps while she is under twilight sleep. The medical reports go on to defend staff inability to be in the same room as the patient during their entire labour due to other patients (365-66); a very different scenario to Violet's attention to the labouring women in her care, such as Mrs Quick.

Ferguson gives Dr Heyward's point of view at this stage in Grace's birth story, along with his rationale that forceps was the only way to save both mother and baby despite "damage yes obviously to the surrounding parts but no omelette without breaking eggs" (364). He is contrasted in this novel by Violet's belief in the skill of the retiring Dr Summers, who throughout Violet's career as a traditional midwife respected her knowledge and the trust the local women had in her skills. Dr Summers had previously attended to Violet's emergency cases and assisted with forceps, in a relationship based on reciprocal trust and mutual admiration of the different skill sets that midwives and doctors had at the turn of the twentieth century. Violet believes in his skills and just as importantly, his attitude:

> More than once he had taken a woman into the cottage hospital, and delivered a living child when Violet had thought all was lost; she had watched him insert his forceps, and knew that he had a gentle hand, that matched his gentle manner. (75)

Gentleness and understanding or the lack of, is emphasised in the way Violet and the emerging medical professionals deal with birthing women and difficult birth situations. Ferguson brings the reader's attention to the way those attending births treat the birthing mothers. Grace's emergency forceps delivery is not only told from Dr Heywood's point of view, but again from Joe's perspective who believes Grace had been spared by some of the medical advancements of the local hospital:

> At least they had put Grace into a sort of sleep, so that she would not feel the unspeakable things they were doing to her . . . vile things were done to his wife's body in order to extract his child. (358)

Dr Heyward's lack of empathy, arrogance and racism is obvious in his attitude towards Grace's condition:

> he was in his element, and knew it. In charge again, making the decisions, acting on them . . . The negro woman was particularly challenging, of course; he had had so

> little experience with forceps, particularly these new ones. But he had seen others like them used often enough, and knew the theory as well as anyone. (363)

After Grace's death, her aunt Bea speaks with the now retired Dr Summers about the circumstances that lead to her niece's death by the young Dr Heyward. The experienced doctor ponders the situation, reflecting on Violet's own skill as well as his own:

> he might have perhaps tried the forceps, though the set used by Heyward were of a type unknown to him. But anyone who had worked with him as long as Violet Dimond had would know that with the head so high and labour so hopelessly obstructed he would probably have given the child up for lost, waited until it was dead, and ended the whole sad business with a discreet craniotomy . . . Grace and her husband so young, after all. A second child would almost certainly have fared better. So many women lost the first and went on to manage perfectly well. (375)

His reflection differs from Dr Heyward's who attempted to quickly solve a situation presented to him—without experience and without consulting others who may have offered advice. He also did not see beyond the immediate problem of extracting the child alive and did not foresee how damaged the mother's body had been in this hasty procedure. Her injuries were dismissed, and she weakened quickly over several days before dying. Dr Summers on the other hand, takes into account the effect of his actions upon not only the infant, but the mother and the family as a unit. This gives him a different solution to Dr Heyward. Dr Summers would have chosen to save the mother in order to bring about the possibility of a complete family unit in the future. Ferguson brings to this narrative a more nuanced approach to the binary between the medical and natural model of childbirth that Cosslett has described in her research. Ferguson demonstrates through the outcome of Grace's tragic experience of childbirth that it is not merely technical skill that is important in assisting with childbirth, but the concept of care that can make a significant difference.

Ferguson's narrative draws upon tropes involving the birthing woman as beast, the midwife as local witch figure, and the horrified onlooker. This twenty-first century use of images from fiction of the previous century points to the continued portrayal of childbirth as dark and horrifying. This residual manifestation of mid-twentieth century images in *The Midwife's Daughter* reiterates how entrenched images associated with the maternal body can become, and how these tropes are recurring across centuries and decades.

However, there is a key emergent quality in this novel, which I call the contrasting birth scene and which I will describe across several novels in this section. The emergent quality comes from the literary technique of contrast. This technique places two birth scenes within the same narrative with the intention of one critiquing the other. This purposeful critique of the treatment of the birthing mother is an emergent quality in fiction from the twenty-first century. In *The Midwife's Daughter*, Ferguson uses contrast to explore two different birth scenes: the first birth of Mrs Quick attended by the traditional midwife Violet, and Grace's difficult and ultimately fatal labour attended by the obstetrician Dr Heywood. Mrs Quick's birth, while alluding to turn-of-the-twentieth century perceptions about appropriate female behaviour in childbirth, nevertheless demonstrates childbirth from the perspective of a woman who works alongside the birthing mother to assist her to birth in a calm and safe space. Violet's attitude reiterates the belief that it is the mother's own efforts that are critical in the arrival of her baby.

Grace's experience of childbirth, by contrast, renders her unconscious with chemically induced twilight sleep. She can neither voice her fears nor assert her autonomy. She is literally blinded and silenced by a male doctor who then performs invasive and "vile" (358) acts upon her body. The professional medical care that she is presumed to receive results in bodily harm, then the loss of her life. Her mother as her birthing advocate is also shunned and sidelined because she is deemed to have primitive skills and no academic

qualifications. Ferguson places these two birth scenes as bookends in the novel to highlight the experience of birth with violence, without empathy and in the shadow of death. While death has been explored as being a dominant representation of pregnancy and the postpartum period, and while death is foreshadowed in this novel, it is the contrasting birth scenes which I claim to be an emergent quality in literature on the maternal.

In *The Midwife's Daughter*, the narrative also focuses on perceptions of class, women, and people of colour. Grace is the only character of colour in a town where attitudes, good standing within the community and status can either help people earn a living or render them one of the poorer classes. In doing this, Ferguson gives a clear distinction between the empathy and attention to care that Violet demonstrates as a traditional midwife, and the lack of empathy and attention given by a new generation of medical professionals who must balance the health care of a growing population. Violet appears as a helpful and genuinely caring manifestation of the twentieth-century peasant crone figure. Her character shares commonalities with previous examples of the figure, noted by Cosslett who found an emphasis on depicting this role of female healer as senior in age and wisdom, and without formal education (Cosslett 31). In contrast, the newly trained and endorsed midwives are as distinctly lacking an empathetic bedside manner as Dr Heywood, but their training and endorsed status brings a change in how the residents of Silkhampton feel about untrained midwives. The novel sets up a very strong opposition between those who practiced midwifery in the traditional manner and those who seek to end traditional practices. Violet is pestered many times by newly trained nurse midwives and local doctors to upgrade her skills and become a registered midwife in line with new legislation being enacted in 1902. She senses a tension in the villagers once her inability to register is public knowledge:

> others who had been grateful for Violet's services for years suddenly felt alarmed, and counted themselves lucky to have survived her ignorant ministrations. At least now there was a proper trained midwife, who knew what she was doing! (123)

Ferguson acknowledges historic connections between childbirth, witchcraft and death (Cosslett 33) in her descriptions of Violet, whose status within the Silkhampton community steadily decreases due to her inability to be formally registered and her taking in of a "darkie" (5) orphan:

> She was Mrs Dimond, urgently sent for in the middle of the night, ready to practice the arcane behind closed doors, in possession of the grisliest secrets of the hidden adult world; sent for, sometimes, in resignation, in grief; for apart from the unspoken horrors of birth, Mrs Dimond was also the woman you went to after a death. (62)

Violet is the woman who deals with the taboo subjects of her society-childbirth, death and foreigners. Her position as semi-literate woman ensures that her social position is insecure throughout the narrative, mirroring the social position of her daughter Grace upon her arrival in Silkhampton. Violet remains the local woman willing to assist not only those in childbirth, but in preparing the dead for burial, something she is able to continue to do despite not being able to work as a midwife as "she had discovered that the new professional lady midwife was not allowed to touch the dead at all, for fear of infection" (114). The connotation of midwife as witch is not lost on the people of Silkhampton, who have a significant shift in attitude towards their "handy-woman" (61) once they are made aware of the new technologies of obstetric practice made available to them for a price. Violet's work remains acceptable only to the poorer classes who have no other means of maternity care. For the rising middle class, "Mrs Dimond, the Holy Terror, was deposed. Served her right, mean old besom, carrying on like the Old Testament, and messing about with darkies!" (113). Violet is likened to a troublemaker and a broom made of sticks, both connotations associated with witchcraft,

whose actions unsettle the social structures of Silkhampton with her foray into the recesses of her society.

Violet's narrative also highlights the disadvantages of the poor and she feels quite strongly that the poor have the right to be attended at the time of their birth in their own home, and that a fee should not mean disadvantaged women should experience childbirth alone. When newly qualified midwife Sister Goodrich admonishes Violet for attending to a poor family without official training, Violet replies, "Am I to stand by, and let some poor creature deliver on her own, like a horse in a field?" (125). She is outraged at the lack of common sense that would see women of the poorer class left without basic assistance due to their inability to pay for a professional. Sister Goodrich's youth and her rigorous approach to bureaucracy leaves Violet pondering the sudden change that is about to occur in the life of new mothers. Ferguson inserts her authorial tone into her narrative, making use of the literary techniques of contrast and irony. When Goodrich leaves, Violet is left to consider the ramifications of this new vigour to organise and professionalise the attendance of childbirth:

> She was young enough to have been one of Violet's own; as she strode off down the street Violet wondered, indeed, who had delivered her. Someone like me, I don't doubt . . . Soon in that country the time of the handywoman, of the local wise woman, the experienced amateur hand, for good or ill, was over. For a little while Violet Dimond was the very last of a tradition older than any profession, older than history, older than writing and houses, perhaps older than weapons, older than fire. Then that tradition ended, and no one, not even Violet herself, remarked its passing. (125)

The Midwife's Daughter offers a reflection on the passing of an ancient female tradition amidst the rise in wealth, global conflict and technological changes that affect the entire community. Ferguson's novel is a narrative about the importance of care for mothers and the

benefit of experienced and open-minded collaboration between those working with birthing mothers and their infants.

The dominant representation in this novel is of the continuing low status of women both as consumers of medical care and those women who provide care to mothers and infants. Even the newly professional midwife Miss Goodrich reflects that "It was curious, regrettable, that the world at large still regarded the work of helping women safely to deliver their children as at once noble and distasteful, important and embarrassing, even slightly comical" (351). Although Violet's status decreases throughout the narrative and the professionalism of the newly trained midwives attracts local prestige, all groups of women in this narrative—the birthing mothers, the new and the traditional midwives—are subject to the over-arching structure of the newly male-dominated domain of the obstetric specialist. While there is a contrast between the open-minded Dr Summers who worked collaboratively with Violet and the younger impulsive Dr Heywood, there is a strong sense in both male characters of using women in the profession of caregiving for their own advantage. In Violet's own words, Dr Summers worked with her and not against her traditional practices as it enabled him the time to take a full fee from wealthier patients and have Violet visit the poor. Her untrained position also meant that she would never be able to set herself up as a "rival" (89) to his expertise. Dr Heywood meanwhile, approached medical care with necessity and not empathy (365) with an attitude focused on efficient improvement and progress that would eventually lead him to renown as a doctor who had lowered maternal mortality (341-42).

While dominant representations of childbirth in this novel utilise the increasing esteem of technology, the medical profession and wealth, the midwife is presented as a residual figure, literally poised between ancient tradition and new technological advances. While she may no longer practice within the mainstream of her community, her traditions will always be of use to a generation of the poorest in the community, until such time as the medical profession is

established enough to offer care for all members of society. *The Midwife's Daughter* uses fictional storytelling to explore concepts about women's care in labour and childbirth that formed an important part of the natural birth discourse and the role of the midwife that expanded the work that began with Grantly Dick-Read and became a flourishing movement from the late 1970s with works such as the Boston Women's Health Collective title *Our Bodies, Ourselves,* and the writings of Ina May Gaskin, Michel Odent and Sheila Kitzinger.

Ferguson's use of contrast between science and tradition, and between life and death as they relate to childbirth, offers rich material in this chapter for the critical examination of the representation of childbirth in the early twenty-first century. Her themes have been echoed in other texts presented in this chapter, and together they form a pattern of representation of childbirth. While this novel provides much to be analysed in the way of Williams' patterns of dominant and residual, Ferguson's use of contrasting birth scenes is a technique that I will continue to explore in the remaining novels of this section as one key emergent quality in twenty-first-century novels exploring maternity. This deliberate authorial set-up of one birth scene that is critiqued by the description of a second birth scene in the narrative uses contrast to read the childbirth in each scene as a place for women of either their empowerment or disempowerment. The reader is left in no doubt by this stark contrast as to which possibility of childbirth is considered more woman-centred, compassionate and autonomous. The narration—coupling the reactions of the characters both during and after each childbirth scene and the consequences for the infant and the mother—gives a strong sense of one birth scene representing a better outcome than the other.

The Birth House Ami McKay (2006)

The Birth House, another example of historical fiction, also focuses on the role of the traditional village midwife in a pre-World War I rural community in Canada. McKay begins

her narrative in *The Birth House* by giving the young Dora and the elderly Miss Babineau a genealogy that eventually ties them to the province of Scots Bay. While Miss B knows she is from a family of healers, Dora is the first in her family to be considered markedly different from the rest of her family, by her more Mi'Kmaq features, her gender, as well as the caul present on her face at birth, considered fortuitous by the townsfolk. Miss B believes these are all signs that Dora is to be the next village midwife (71-72) and she is adamant that Dora is to be her apprentice despite Dora's reluctance. Their features mark them as outsiders, and while Miss B is very comfortable with her status within the village, Dora is at first uncertain about the impact on her marriage prospects from associating with the midwife, until she begins to develop a deep respect for Miss B's knowledge and compassion for the poor rural families of the area.

The narrative is set in the mountainous Scots Bay, Nova Scotia, where the seasons influence what people plant, how they fish and how they live. When Dora is eighteen, bachelors in her region begin to leave for the army as the First World War escalates. At this time, she is encouraged to assist the elderly village healer Miss Babineau to "catch babies" (7) and learn to be a traditional midwife. Miss Babineau mixes traditional herbs with Marian devotions and some Indigenous healing customs. She has Acadian heritage and is a proud descendant of a "*traiteur*" (25), a healer who used spiritual gifts as well as traditional medicines. While "Some say she's a witch, others say she's more of an angel" (7), Dora claims "I'm the only person in all of Scots Bay who dares make a friendly call to the old midwife" (23). Women only come to Miss B if they need contraception, abortion, assistance with sexual health, childbirth or illness in their children. They support her by leaving food and supplies at her doorstep whenever they can as she does not accept payment for her healing. Miss B is another example of Cosslett's "peasant crone" (38) who is the keeper of an ancient wisdom for her community.

The first birth Dora assists at is the unwanted thirteenth pregnancy of the very poor Ketch family. The father is an alcoholic and abusive. There is much description of the family's poverty by having so many mouths to feed and how the eldest daughter Iris Rose is responsible for many of them (11). The baby is born very premature and dies within hours. His mother, Mrs Experience Ketch, tells Dora and Miss B to take the infant's body and "Get that thing away from me. I got twelve more than I can handle anyways" (13). The scene sets up the burden of poverty and a lack of contraception for women who cannot space their children out because of abusive or unfeeling husbands. Iris Rose Ketch, the responsible eldest daughter, is eventually dumped on Dora's doorstep years later. Miss B has died, and Dora is the village midwife. Iris Rose's father "hires her out, sells her body, for money" (252) and now abandons her in her pregnancy. Iris Rose haemorrhages to death, but Dora is able to save her infant daughter whom she adopts and names Wrennie. McKay, like Ferguson in *The Midwife's Daughter,* utilises the literary technique of contrast to place birth scenes or characters in comparison to one another so that values may be formed about the topics explored in the novel related to women's sexual health and their treatment by the village men. Contrasted with the Rare and Babineau family lines that detail heroes and healers, the Ketch family history is marked by violence against its women and the desperation of poverty.

Similar to the narrative structure of *The Midwife's Daughter*, McKay also uses contrasting birth scenes by first detailing a safe homebirth assisted by Dora (67), and Miss B's techniques that assisted in turning a breech baby (107-09), before the narrative details the "Twilight Sleep" (110) experience of the mothers at the newly opened Canning Maternity Hospital in the nearest town. Dora accompanies Ginny Jessup to the hospital and watches carefully as the new obstetrician in town begins his work:

> Dr Thomas says he can make it easier. He can take the pain away. Twilight sleep, scopolamine and morphine. She won't remember a thing . . . heels settled in stirrups,

> knees falling limp to either side. The body keeps working while she's gone, quaking, twitching. (110)

This description of childbirth via anaesthesia is contrasted to Mabel Thorpe's home birth where she is assisted not only by Dora and Miss B, but by her neighbours:

> Mabel closed her eyes and let out a long, anguished wail. Bertine and Sadie cried out loud beside her, moaning right with her, all three women letting out heavy groans. (67)

When Dora and Miss B "finished tending to Mabel and her new baby . . . we left them in Sadie and Bertine's care" (67). Contrasted to this is Dora witnessing Ginny Jessup waking up from twilight sleep after the birth of her first baby at the maternity hospital:

> Ginny's eyes open and her hand reaches out to me. The rest of her body is still, as if she's afraid to question what's just happened. There was no moment of celebration at the end. She's feeling left behind, unsure . . . The doctor sees this as normal. A kind of bliss. He's happy when he greets her . . .
>
> *Can you recall what happened?*
>
> *Not much. No, nothing, actually.*
>
> *Good. Good.*
>
> She's weak on her feet. She can't keep food down. She thanks him for her accomplishment. She waits to hold her child. (111)

Miss B had made a point of not leaving her homebirths until the mothers were resting in bed and had taken tea and food (67). Not only is the contrast detailed in the care of the mothers after birth, but in the materials and equipment needed to assist in their birthing. Apart from the drugs detailed at the maternity hospital to assist a pain-free birth, Dr Thomas proudly demonstrates the latest technology:

> forceps, the obstetrical physician's best friend . . . I brought out all these things—the surgical knives, the scissors, the needles . . . not to frighten you, but to show you the path of modern medicine. These things hasten childbirth and put the labour process in the doctor's hands. He has complete control. (57)

Miss Babineau and Dora come to homebirths with herbs and elixirs, holy water and clean sheets. Their recipes and techniques have been passed down through Miss B's family, but the most important aspect of care is time for the mother and prayers (12-13). Miss B's work is not in hastening a woman's childbirth but to assist her with the journey as best she can, knowing that this work often takes nights and days. Her attitude is reminiscent of Violet Dimond's tea drinking and careful watching of a woman's physical changes in labour, only stepping in when necessary (Ferguson 21). McKay's novel emphasises the distinct aspects of maternal care present in the work of traditional midwives that was set aside in the flourish of new obstetric practices. Dora's experience as a young midwife is set more widely within a narrative of a world changing outside of Scots Bay, while the residents nestled safely within it resist the change brought about by technology and war.

Like Ferguson, McKay utilises the technique of the contrasting birth scene, one set within the safety of home and the comfort of female neighbours, while the other is set in the new maternity hospital. The contrast is marked not only between the settings of home and the hospital, but also the active physicality of Mabel's homebirth is set against the silent, clinical and detached twilight sleep delivery of Ginny's baby. In *The Birth House,* the figure of the midwife is a residual image at the juncture of immense social and technological change. She symbolises the pastoral, the ideal and the traditional, compared to the eerie silence of the new mother waking from a chemically induced sleep to discover she has birthed a baby. The representation of obstetric technology, rudimentary as it was in the early twentieth century, reinforces the birthing woman as passive, dominated by medical professionals and without a

voice. Both novels use the technique of contrast to represent birth as a situation that can work to empower the mother in its simplest, most traditional form. The mother at home, surrounded by the presence of caring women, is depicted as the ideal situation for childbirth.

Conclusion to Section 1

The three texts presented in Section 1 demonstrate the importance of valuing the mother's birthing experience and the critical impact of empathetic and woman-centred care. While at times prone to idealising the rustic homebirth in historical fiction, the genre is not free from exploring the negatives associated with traditional homebirth models. McKay clearly demonstrates this in her narrative when even the most compassionate care at home cannot stop adverse circumstances for mother or baby (McKay 12-14). However, these three texts overwhelmingly favour the natural birth model of care over the medicalised model of care. The emphasis on the positive outcomes of natural and predominately homebirth demonstrates the authors' engagements with dominant ideas about maternity care and the ongoing discourse of both models of natural and medical childbirth. This engagement is simplified due to its function as a plot device in the narrative. O'Reilly emphasises the need to understand the natural model of childbirth and the medical model of childbirth as not a simple binary but a discourse containing complexity on both sides. "The natural mode of childbirth as a product of cultural struggle . . . is thus always framed by the discourse it seeks to dismantle" (O'Reilly, "Labour Signs" 34). What is natural can only be understood when it is placed in contrast to the medical model.

While the use of historical fiction about birthing and midwifery is a residual outcome of multiple generations of discourse on the two main models of maternity care in the west, it is the use of contrasting birth scenes in the novels of Ferguson and McKay to comment on

maternity care that demonstrates emergent qualities. This placement of two or more birth scenes within one novel allows a reading of the multiplicity of outcomes when the mother's needs are not met. These novels in Section 1, unlike Winton's short story, also present the birthing woman from the perspective of female caregivers in contrast with male partners and doctors. The perspective of the birth when narrated by Violet in *The Midwife's Daughter* or Dora in *The Birth House* comes from a position of duty and care, and it is free of the horror associated with Poston's male onlookers in the mid-twentieth century. It is this literary technique of contrast that is the emergent quality in these examples of fiction about childbirth.

Section 2: Childbirth under Duress and Threat

The following analysis consists of a selection of birth scenes in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century fiction that share a common theme of childbirth occurring under conditions of duress and threat, in a circumstance where the mother is neither valued nor safe. This section presents situations that are in direct contrast with some of the birth scenes of Section 1, where birth is prepared for and the birthing woman is often able to have her needs attended to by female caregivers. The birth scenes in Section 2 share similarities with the scenes depicting twilight sleep in *The Midwife's Daughter* and *The Birth House*, where birth is a situation out of the mother's control and which renders her silent, detached or under threat in some way. Poston's heroine tradition is most apparent in the examples of birth scenes in Section 2, but my examinations of these texts will demonstrate that the tradition is not as straightforward as Poston found. Authors writing beyond the 1980s engage in varied ideas about childbirth, womanhood and power. Alongside the main texts of this chapter, I will consider birth scenes in Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010) and Toni Morrison's historical slave narrative *Beloved* (1987). These latter texts will be considered again later, in a more extensive analysis on breastfeeding in both novels in chapter 4. The analysis is presented thematically and not in chronological order.

The Handmaid's Tale Margaret Atwood (1985)

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a depiction of a dystopian future where women have been placed in positions of reproductive servitude for the rich and infertile. Handmaids are not allowed to keep their own children, and they experience a specially structured totalitarian regime of surveillance of their pregnancy, birth and the postpartum period. The novel is set in the fictional state of Gilead, where women have been forced into

specific classes of society in the aftermath of a Christian fundamentalist revolution. The narrator, Offred, is a Handmaid and one of the few fertile young women left after the nuclear war.

Pamela Cooper's study of Atwood's novel reads *The Handmaid's Tale* as "mapping women's struggle for survival and empowerment onto the body" (92). The use of architecture, clothing, food and colour are all read by Cooper as the means by which the institutions of Gilead maintain control of the feminine body,

> removing the possibility of bodily control entirely from the heroine's grasp. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, power over the body is displaced from the realm of the personal and distributed across faceless social mechanisms which render women passive and discipline their flesh to authoritarian needs. (95)

Through the narrative of Offred, the reader is invited to experience the rapidly changing boundaries of autonomy. The Handmaids are restricted in every aspect of their existence, which has been distilled to maternal vessel. A Handmaid's fertility and pregnancy is under surveillance by the authorities of Gilead; each Handmaid's body is under threat. They must perform according to the structure of authority and produce the Commander's household an heir. The authority of Gilead upon the female body is most poignant in the scene of childbirth. One of the rituals requires all Handmaids to watch and support a fellow Handmaid birthing, after which the baby is taken into the care of the infertile couple and the Handmaid moved to a new household.

Atwood's text offers rich opportunities for scholarship across the entire novel in relation to its representation of women and motherhood. However, I will contain my analysis to the birth scene in order to demonstrate how the dominant representations of childbirth as heroic for the woman and the pinnacle of womanhood that was evidenced in Poston's research has become a residual manifestation of childbirth by exposing the patriarchal

structures implicit in motherhood's status. The birth scene in this novel involves the Handmaid Janine whose birth is narrated and explained by Offred. It is the crowning moment in Janine's role as a Handmaid. This scene, like Winton's short story, employs the tradition of the birthing woman as heroine:

> She's crying, helplessly, burnt-out miserable tears. Nevertheless we are jubilant, it's a victory, for all of us. We've done it. She'll be allowed to nurse the baby, for a few months, they believe in mother's milk. After that she'll be transferred, to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward (137).

Janine is heroic in the eyes of the other women because of the very fact of childbirth itself in a society where fertility is rare. Janine has won for herself the status of successful Handmaid and this will increase her chances of survival in Gilead. Handmaids must have intercourse only with the husband of the household, and the pregnancy of a Handmaid is seen as a sign of male strength. In this society, the hero is the husband who has impregnated the Handmaid and therefore allowed his lineage to survive. The Handmaid is simply the vessel by which this can be done. A Handmaid's heroism in childbirth is only valued when placed within a patriarchal and patriotic system. As Montelaro explains:

> the ecstatic frenzy of the Handmaids during the birthing celebration only reinforces their ideological programming by the state of Gilead, but the women's catharsis of participating in the birth event is nothing more than a short-lived illusion of unity. (241)

The Handmaids are allowed to come together for a childbirth to emphasise the expectation of their role and to reiterate the consequences that will await them if they do not achieve the desired outcome: the live birth of a healthy infant. Janine's acceptance of her role and her diligent participation in her duties to bring about a successful pregnancy and birth are what

make her heroic and, in the words of Offred, "a flag on a hilltop showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved" (36). Atwood has satirised the tradition of the birthing woman as heroine, because the birth of Janine's baby is not an act of heroism by surviving childbirth and entering motherhood and full adult maturity. It is because of the childbirth that the mother's life is "saved" quite literally from the perils of infertility. It is infertility that is life-threatening in *The Handmaid's Tale* and not the physical risks of childbirth.

Atwood's narrator Offred remains infertile at the conclusion of the novel and is problematised as a heroine. She has left the legacy of her story via audiotape, but it remains unknown in the novel how she was able to record her story and how her escape from the Commander's house was planned. She is a protagonist whose key characteristic, according to Allan Weiss, is to function within the oppressive structures and to continually seek the means to survive. He states that "Offred is guilty of complacency, complicity, and selfish concern for her own private needs and desires" (138). She offers no real model of rebellion compared to other female characters, such as Moira (Weiss 137), and the birth scene reiterates the threat and duress in which all Handmaids live. Those Handmaids who do birth are only heroic for the success they have provided an infertile couple and the increasing status of that couple. The Handmaid remains an object of possession to be passed onto the next household in the hope of repeating her initial success. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood problematises Poston's category of birthing woman as heroine by showing that the figure of the heroine is defined by patriarchal boundaries, some of which force her to birth under threat of death if she refuses to hand over the child, and which allows her no contact afterwards. She must birth in the only acceptable position, which is between the legs of the Wife, and comply in the charade with all women afterwards that deny her rights to her own child in order for the Wife to be seen as the only mother.

The use of a fictitious State allows Atwood to critique definitions of motherhood within a patriarchal system, framed within a focus on the pregnant and birthing body. Handmaids have been defined as "a necessity" (23) in accordance with a duty to "be fruitful and multiply" (99). A Handmaid is merely a body to be used for the Commander's Wife to be able to experience motherhood. Motherhood, in this narrative, is separated from the experience of the birthing mother. Motherhood is the status given to women of the ruling class as a reward for their status as wives. The embodied experience of maternity and childrearing are two separate experiences and duties. 'Woman' is held in contrast with "Unwoman" (137) the result of not being able to "be fruitful" (99). Womanhood is a biological function, childbirth a duty, and motherhood a status symbol. Atwood's novel problematises Poston's dominant understanding of childbirth as heroic by laying childbirth within structures of power and oppression and removing its traditional connection to years of childrearing. Childbirth as heroic for the woman is now ironic and has become a residual manifestation of the traditional heroism of the mid-twentieth century.

Beloved Toni Morrison (1987)

The theme of childbirth under duress and threat continues in Toni Morrison's *Beloved.* Love and joy through childbirth is problematised in the novel by the layering of race, biological sex, poverty and slavery. Her novels have been the topic of literary scholarship on the maternal (Baxter and Satz) as Morrison is a female writer who clearly "foregrounds the mother's body" (Frampton 145) in her work. *Beloved,* her fifth novel, explores the desperate struggle of a young mother with four children to free herself and her family from slavery and a past that is haunting her through the ghostly presence of a dead child.

Childbirth is represented as a heroic feat by Sethe, who births her fourth child Denver while escaping from slavery. However, this heroism is marked by the attitudes of Amy in

relation to slavery, servitude and freedom; she at first sees Sethe's birthing body as savage and animalistic, in keeping with Poston's traditional representations of childbirth. This scene is also marked by the placing of the birthing woman within a situation of physical threat beyond the physiology of labour and childbirth. Sethe has recently escaped her plantation "Sweet Home" (74) when strong labour pains overtake her on her escape route. A young white servant girl named Amy reluctantly assists her in giving birth. This slave narrative complicates Poston's categories of the birthing woman as animal or savage, as Sethe is automatically deemed savage by the white American society due to her status as slave sans pregnancy. Sethe's master, the "schoolteacher", has repeatedly taught his nephews who work on the plantation to categorise their slaves in a notebook. Regarding Sethe, he tells them:

> "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up." (228)

Schoolteacher and others who support slavery believe slaves have retained animalistic behavior and a stunted emotional, moral and intellectual capacity in comparison to whites. The white servant girl Amy Denver shares this belief of black people as savage when she comes across Sethe, semi-conscious in the grass. She layers her belief in the birthing slave woman as animalistic when she realised Sethe is in labour: "What you gonna do, just lay there and foal?" (41). Reluctantly agreeing to help Sethe into an abandoned shelter, Amy chatters happily about how good she is at helping sick "things" (97) recover. In these hours Amy is in control of Sethe's body, busy tending to her much like an injured stray animal. When Sethe's body moves out of Amy's control into active labour, Amy is surprised, but also horrified and disgusted; Kristeva would describe this phase as "abjection" (*Powers of Horror* 2). Sethe's body has become uncontrollable as Amy tries to get her into a small rowboat:

> Sethe couldn't think of anywhere to go but in. She waited for the sweet beat that followed the blast of pain. On her knees again, she crawled into the boat. It waddled

> under her and she had just enough time to brace her leaf-bag feet on the bench when another rip took her breath away. Panting under four summer stars, she threw her legs over the side, because here came the head. (98)

Amy is shocked by this sudden change in Sethe, a change from a meek slave contained under Amy's healing hands to a maternal body under the control of its own fierce and violent physiological birthing process. Unlike Poston's schizoid tradition, it is Sethe who remains rational and calm, focusing on a strategy to help her engage Amy's help in the birth, while it is Amy who is reduced to irrationality:

> It was stuck. Face up and drowning in its mother's blood.
>
> Amy stopped begging Jesus and began to curse His daddy.
>
> "Push!" screamed Amy.
>
> "Pull," whispered Sethe.
>
> And the strong hands went to work a fourth time. (99)

Amy, as the horrified onlooker, is in panic. Morrison's novel complicates these two traditions of the savage and the schizoid birthing woman because of the context of slavery, thereby highlighting the reactions of people around the birthing woman and how their reactions are a product of their beliefs about women, birth, race and power. Amy assists Sethe, first reluctantly but then with more involvement. Her involvement in this birth breaks down the onlooker/birthing woman, savage/civilised binaries that the traditional representation of childbirth utilises. Amy is quite taken by the infant and proudly declares to Sethe that this baby must know she was assisted into this world by "Miss Amy Denver. Of Boston" (100). At first reading this may seem to be Amy's way of making a white claim on an enslaved history, but it can be read as a female-to-female connection within the theme of birth under duress. Sethe is birthing with the threat of being found and captured, giving her childbirth an urgent, climatic pace within the wider structure of the novel. Yet both women in this scene

are under captivity and threat. Sethe is a born slave and Amy a servant running away from a master who beats her. Both are risking their lives by escaping from the men who own them. Their histories are linked within a societal structure where women serve the needs of men for economic advantage yet are treated as subhuman. What causes this realisation for Amy is her assistance in Sethe's birth. Through this event she sees a connection between the two of them, as women, under the threat and power of men, that she couldn't see clearly before when she automatically cast Sethe as slave, and therefore animal, in her mind. The birth has been a way for Amy to move towards a more human recognition of the impact of slavery upon women.

Childbirth in *Beloved* is framed by the status of servant and slave women in America's Antebellum South. The animal and savage representation of the birthing woman undergoes a change in this novel, brought about by Amy's reluctant and dawning understanding of the real physical threats awaiting both women alone in the fields. Sethe as heroine is dwarfed in this scene by the larger threat of her body and her infant as property of the Schoolteacher. The birth scene in *Beloved* renders Poston's traditional categories more complex with the intersection of race, slavery and the female sex. Morrison's depiction of childbirth utilises traditions of animal, savage and heroine while bringing new understandings. This is evidence of the ways in which *Beloved* creates residual uses of traditional forms of representing childbirth.

Room Emma Donoghue (2010) and *The Tax Inspector* Peter Carey (1991)

Sharing some commonalities of sexual slavery with Offred and Sethe, Ma, the protagonist of *Room*, was kidnapped as a young college student and held captive as a sex slave in a reinforced garden shed for eight years. Her rapes by captor Old Nick result in one stillbirth

and one live birth. The narrative is told from the perspective of her five-year-old son Jack, the infant that survived childbirth in the shed he and his mother call Room (15). The first understanding Jack has of being Ma's second-born child in Room (15) is when she is discussing the criminal trial of Old Nick with lawyers after her and Jack's escape. After going through the list of offences that her captor will be charged with, Ma asks,

> "What about the baby?"
>
> "Jack?"
>
> "The first one. Doesn't that count as some kind of murder?" (253)

Ma's lawyer regretfully explains to her that a charge of murder can only be brought forward if the infant was born alive. Without Ma realising, Jack has been listening to this conversation and trying to piece together the intriguing information. He asks her in private, and Ma replies with, "she got murdered, kind of" (254). When Jack presses her for more details it is an effort for her to recount the birth while explaining it to a young child.

> "remember the cord that goes to the belly button?"
>
> "You cutted it with the scissors and then I was free."
>
> Ma's nodding. "But with the girl baby, it got tangled when she was coming out, so she couldn't breathe".
>
> "I don't like this story."
>
> She presses her eyebrows. "Let me finish it."
>
> "I don't—"
>
> "He was right there, watching." Ma's nearly shouting. "He didn't know the first thing about babies getting born, he hadn't even bothered to Google it. I could feel the top of her head, it was all slippery, I pushed and pushed, I was shouting, 'Help, I can't, help me—' And he just stood there . . . She never opened her eyes . . . he took her away and buried her under a bush in the backyard." (255-56; lower-case in the original)

Empathetic to the harrowing story she has just shared with her five-year-old, Ma immediately reflects on the positive aspects of Jack's birth, a well-known story that Jack enjoys and often asks for (4). In contrast to the birth of his sister, Jack's story is a joyous event among the endless repetition of captivity in Room (401): "I thought, *Jack's on his way*. First thing in the morning, you slid out onto the rug with your eyes open" (4). Ma's narrative of the second birth is demonstrative of her determination to take charge of the situation and create the best outcome despite the circumstances. This time, she doesn't allow her captor to be present as a reminder of her captivity: "I roared, 'Get out.' . . . I was ready, this time I wanted it to be just me and you" (256). Unlike the birthing women in Section 1 who sought strength from empathetic husbands, midwives or trusted neighbours, Ma is heroic in her unassisted births. Finding herself without any practical or emotional support, she relies on her inner strength to birth her son. This physical and psychological achievement becomes the turning point in her captivity. Sharing similarities with Poston's analysis of novels from the twentieth century, where successful childbirth is the culmination of womanhood (Poston 27), the successful birth of Jack becomes the high point in his young mother's life. She recounts in a television interview her dramatic captivity and rescue. Despite the horrific conditions of her captivity, Ma claims that the birth of Jack changed her because "I was alive again, I mattered" (291). When asked by the interviewer, "Was that the hardest thing you've ever done?" Ma shakes her head. "The best thing" (291). In contrast to the chapter on Pregnancy and the Postpartum period, which sees characters feeling anxiety and a sense of loss upon the birth of their children, childbirth has the opposite effect on Ma. It gives her purpose and resolve to endure her captivity and the opportunity for love and joy through her son, despite her enslaved state.

While Ma's birth stories reinforce Poston's tradition of the heroic unassisted birth and is therefore a residual manifestation of the birthing woman as heroine, the use of contrasting birth scenes is another example of the emergent quality I term the contrasting birth scene. In

Room, the use of contrast is not to comment on the binary between medical and natural discourse, nor to highlight distinctions between the traditional and the technological. Instead, the contrasting birth scene in this novel works to establish a strong sense of maternal self in Ma. It is no coincidence that her first name is unknown to the reader throughout the novel. She is Jack's entire world and known only as Ma. She is therefore Ma not only in name but in identity as well. While this successful matrescence may seem to amplify Poston's concept of motherhood as heroic and the ultimate success for all women, Ma reaches this matrescence by shutting her oppressor out. Ma establishes agency against oppression by refusing her oppressor access to her physical birthing space, and to her psyche. She tunes him out and focuses instead on the new relationship between herself and her son, building into this dyad a reciprocal trust and relationship that will eventually lead them both to individual subjectivity once Outside (262). Ma's actions are unlike the analysis by Poston where birthing mothers are constrained by patriarchal narratives of the nuclear family and of marriage, a theme that has been reiterated in my analyses in the Pregnancy and Postpartum chapter,

In a similar way to Ma, Maria Takis in Peter Carey's *The Tax Inspector* (1991) births unassisted and in a situation of captivity and immediate danger. This character also demonstrates Poston's commonly found traditions of the heroine and the birthing woman as animalistic. Maria Takis is the heavily pregnant tax inspector sent from the Australian Taxation Office to investigate the second-hand car dealership Catchprice Motors. Maria is a single mother-to-be, the pregnancy a result of an office affair turned sour which also resulted in her demotion. In this black comedy, Maria is successfully seduced by a member of the Catchprice family who has no interest in the outcome of her audit. Opposed to this affair is sixteen-year-old Benny, who tries to take Maria's attention away from his uncle and his affair with Maria in the hope that Benny can be the saviour of his family business. The plan fails, along with Benny's attempts to wrest power over the business from his aunt and

grandmother. Benny loses all sanity by the end of the tax audit and takes Maria hostage in his private basement underneath the car showroom.

Threatening to kill Maria with a gun and intent on his own revenge, he fails to notice she has gone into labour. Seen through Benny's eyes, Maria's labour quickly transforms her from the sexy woman she appears to be to all the men in the Catchprice family to a bestial creature:

> Maria Takis was standing by the work bench, her hands pushed against the wall making a noise like a dog . . . Her face was red, veins standing out. She looked so ugly he could not believe it was the same person. Huh-huh-huh she said. A witch. (272)

Benny is horrified by what he sees and suspends his plan to kill her when she makes him realise that the baby will be killed as well. He half attempts to assist her but is too shocked by what he can see and hear to be of real help.

> Water and blood gushed out from between her legs, passed through her blue knickers as if they weren't even there.
>
> 'Shit' he said . . .
>
> Then she started hollering again. He could not bear it. She was shrieking like he was murdering her. (274)

Carey uses powerful visceral images. Amniotic fluid mixes with the stagnant water that covers the basement floor. Her maternal lingerie is ruined with blood. Her eyes and face and voice have changed beyond recognition. Upon first reading it seems yet another text in the tradition of the birthing woman as savage or animal. However, Carey's narrative plays upon what could be a straightforward animalistic depiction of childbirth. In this scene, Maria's labour and bodily reactions are normal in comparison to her surroundings and to Benny, who becomes increasingly more agitated and irrational as the scene progresses. The flooded

basement where he keeps Maria hostage is actually Benny's bedroom. He sleeps on the fetid couch amid the flooded floor. His walls are scrawled with his own writing, reminiscent of a captive writing on the walls of their cell. Benny had recently tattooed angel wings along his body and dyed his hair white in an effort to look like the angel he believes he really is. In contrast, Maria is fully focused on birthing and convincing Benny not to kill her while he moves between horror, fantasy, aggression, disbelief and confusion. Unlike Poston's schizoid description where the woman is felt to be torn into two selves that see each other, it is an almost comedic duo in *The Tax Inspector* where the birthing woman is rational and seeks control of the situation while the onlooker unravels in panic. The novel draws upon dominant manifestations of the birthing woman as animal and savage but plays upon ideas of the schizoid, comparing Maria's calm focus under duress and threat with Benny's mounting panic and impulsive behaviour. The manifestation of the calm and panicked duo can be read as a residual image of childbirth in a similar way to the irrationality Amy Denver demonstrates when Sethe gives birth.

Critical analysis by Bode and Ratcliffe on Carey's fourth novel is often focused on the themes of sexual abuse by Mort Catchprice of three out of his four children who, in the opening of the novel, are now adults. Both Bode and Ratcliffe have noted the particular effect this has on the character of Benny who manifests his trauma through his physical expression as an angel and his descent into the basement. However, there is a tendency in their work, and in the attitude of the author Peter Carey, to see Benny as demonstrating some redeeming qualities with regard to how he treats Maria and her baby during the birth. That Benny restrains himself from raping and torturing Maria and is present at the birth of her son appears to the author of *The Tax Inspector*, as well as Bode and Ratcliffe, to be evidence of Benny's change of direction from evil to misunderstood. While there is significant evidence of sexual assault within the Catchprice family, Barbara Bode claims that in encountering Maria, "a

softer side of Benny emerges. He is unable to torture Maria the way he tortured Sarkis, and he even assists during the birth of her baby" (108). My analysis disagrees with Bode's reading of this novel. Benny consistently threatens Maria, and the only way she can convince him to keep the baby alive is to insist that he plans to kill the child. It is because Benny insists that it is not in his pre-meditated plans to kill the infant that he spares both of them. Although he refrains from murder, he continues his plans to degrade Maria in the squalor of the basement so that Benny can feel she is inferior to him, the youngest member of the business who believes himself inferior to the rest of the Catchprice family.

Benny breaks into Maria's house at the beginning of the birth scene and leads her at gunpoint back to the basement of Catchprice Motors where "she could smell her death in the stink of the water" (259). He has made a bondage apparatus with:

> belts, buckles, trusses . . . he had built it for her but he had not thought of how she was. He said he was going to fuck her. He did not want to fuck her, not at all. On the other hand: this was his course. He had visualised it, committed to it. (259)

Upon seeing what is down in the basement Maria thinks, "He probably did not even know himself what cruelty he was capable of" (260). Maria is so distressed by being held hostage that her body activates rapid labour. When he claims, "I wouldn't hurt your baby" Maria tells him,

> 'You're hurting the baby right now, this minute. You're killing it.'
>
> 'No' he shouted.
>
> 'I'm having the baby now,' she said. 'It's coming . . . you can get me out of here right now . . . you can save this baby if you want to.' (263-64)

Maria then makes repeated requests to Benny to hand her the shirt he is wearing. It is the only clean thing she can find in the basement to wrap her baby in. He refuses (272). She resorts to taking her dress off, but she cannot lay it flat. Maria repeats her request for assistance and

again he refuses her (273). She must repeat her statement, "You want this baby to die . . . you want to kill this baby too" (273), and several minutes pass before Benny begins to take her directions to prepare a clean surface. While the actual birth of the baby sees Benny temporarily lay aside his captor persona and assist with unlooping the umbilical cord from around the baby's neck, he does so out of fear that he will be responsible for the death of this newborn (275). His fascination with wrapping the newborn in his shirt and talking to it renders him incapable of listening to Maria, who repeatedly asks for Benny to return the baby to her, so he doesn't die of cold. She asks him six times (276-77) before attempting to bargain with him: "I'll do what you want . . . You want to do it to me, do it to me . . . I'll find you a really nice place to live . . . I'll pay you . . . two thousand dollars" (277). The fact that Maria is compelled to offer her body in exchange for her baby is evidence that Benny is thoroughly transfixed at being the master of this "subterranean domain" (Ratcliffe 186). He continues to see the birthing mother as an animal and not human in her childbirth, even though he recognises Maria is suffering:

> This time he knew she was dying. It was terrible. It was worse than anything he could imagine . . . It was terrible there, in her private parts. He was frightened to look at the hole. It was like an animal. It was opening. Something was pushing. (275)

Benny watches Maria's labour unfold in horror, an emotion so profound that it interrupts his plans for her torture but it is not the move towards compassion that Bode argues. Whilst he acknowledges her pain, he does not show any empathy towards Maria, and his position in the scene remains as Poston's horrified onlooker who sees childbirth as a debasing experience. Benny reinforced the tradition of birth from the "audience . . . point of view" (Poston 20-21) where the "loathsome" (21) aspects of childbirth are amplified to dramatic effect. *Room, The Tax Inspector, The Handmaid's Tale, Beloved* and aspects in *The Midwife's Daughter* and *The Birth House* are providing examples of childbirth that is not only viewed by an audience,

but by an onlooker who exerts control over the birthing woman, the place of birth and the means by which she is given capability to birth.

Benny attempts to control the situation by making a claim on the infant, stating “He’s mine” (276) and referring to him as “Little Benny” when he is clearly not the biological father. Benny’s idealisation of power renders Maria and her infant trapped and awaiting death. Childbirth is thus situated within a domain of control and coercion. Greg Ratcliffe argues that Benny’s basement or “visceral cellar may be interpreted as this ambivalent site of death and regeneration” (188). Death is certainly present, in the reader’s knowledge that above the basement the entire site is exploding to pieces, with deliberately lit sticks of gelignite deliberately lit by other members of the family. Maria senses her impending death the second she enters the basement, and she remains hovering between life and death until the end of the narrative.

It remains open to interpretation whether the basement and the representation of childbirth can be read as regenerative. Peter Carey explained his ideas on childbirth and its origin in this novel in a 1997 interview with Ray Willbanks for *Antipodes* journal. He made reference to Anita Cobby, a twenty-six-year-old Australian nurse who was savagely beaten, sexually assaulted and murdered by five men while walking home from a Sydney train station on the night of the second of February 1986. The crime received much media attention and public outrage (Hosking). Carey told Willbanks:

> I set out to place the birth experience, life itself, in opposition to these damaged men who had killed Anita Cobby. Birth was going to win. How could it not? It had such power . . . I imagined a bigger triumph for birth, but by the time I was at the end of the novel Benny changes. At the end Benny respects life. He hands the child across to Maria. (Willbanks and Carey 11)

Benny does finally give the infant back to his mother, but only because Benny is dying and he has lost all power. He has died from a blow to the head by an iron bar wielded by Maria, who has held onto the bar the entire time in the basement to protect her baby from Benny. When he refuses to hand over the baby for the sixth time, Maria delivers the blow. While Carey may read his novel as providing a model of childbirth as life triumphant over evil and death, the unclear ending leaves Carey's intention tenuous. While Benny clearly meets his end in this scene, and Maria is positioned as heroine, the explosives lit by Gran and Vish detonate as Maria and her newborn make their exit from the basement. The birthing woman in this novel remains under threat, despite her resilience.

Childbirth as triumph is a backdrop in a novel that continues what Carol Poston found to be the traditional twentieth-century representation of birth from the point of view of the horrified onlooker. A horror that amplifies a need to control the maternal body. Maria literally embodies what Kristeva described as "the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body" (*Powers of Horror* 54). Maria's body spills beyond ordered borders; it is in a state of "leakiness" (Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies* 78) that threatens to disrupt Benny's already disoriented view of himself and his family. The plot of *The Tax Inspector* cannot contain such uncontrollability within the bounds of the narrative and is closed off by the explosion of Catchprice Motors. Maria's sexual appeal and availability to the Catchprice men while pregnant may be read as transgressive and, if Maria and her infant are presumed dead, then this character is yet another example of Rogers' "narrative closure" (182) of the transgressive fallen women. If she survived, then Carey has written Maria as the heroic woman who reaches the pinnacle of her femininity by surviving childbirth. In both cases, *The Tax Inspector* draws upon dominant views of the maternal as clearly circumscribed within cultural boundaries.

Conclusion to Section 2

These four texts from the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first show a shift in the literary traditions and a gradual move from dominant to residual manifestations of childbirth. Birthing women are no longer simply heroic or savage or a split self but are more subversive. They remain rational while others panic and experience horror. They realise their inferior position and use strategies to gain a fragile control in the circumstance of birth. While these shifts in the traditions of the representation of childbirth may be seen as a move towards the emergent stage of new understandings of the maternal, these texts share an underlying theme where birth occurs under the fear of punishment, death or violence.

In *Maternal Thinking* (1990), Sara Ruddick wrote about birth and the dichotomy of mind over body in Western philosophy. The mind is always given precedence over the body. It can be pure, not weighed down with bodily desires and capable of transcendental and abstract thinking. The maternal body, however, is liable to loss of control and irrationality, and in the case of birth exposes the most private parts of the female body: "Once I actually looked at birthing labor, it seemed to me that the compulsion to control and minimize birth was expressed in the ideals of reason that dominate Western philosophy." (193) This argument towards reason is critiqued by Atwood's narrator Offred as she recounts her indoctrination as a Handmaid, being made to see films that depicted the contrast between a Handmaid's current birthing experiences to women before the revolution:

> an olden-days hospital: a pregnant woman, wired up to a machine, electrodes coming out of her every which way so that she looked like a broken robot, an intravenous drip feeding into her arm. Some man with a searchlight looking up between her legs, where she'd been shaved, a mere beardless girl, a trayful of bright sterilized knives, everyone with masks on. A co-operative patient. Once they drugged women, induced labour, cut them open, sewed them up. No more. No anesthetics even. (124)

Atwood's narrator is critical of the treatment given to birthing women in previous generations, but also sceptical about how much more liberated birth is in Gilead. It is this element of control of the woman by others in both Offred's pre-Gileadean society and in her current obligations as a Handmaid that makes her feel powerless. *The Handmaid's Tale, Beloved, Room* and *The Tax Inspector* share a common theme that is centred around containment and control. These narratives feature women birthing under duress and threat, in circumstances where they are neither valued nor safe. Birth is seen to need boundaries between the birthing body and others, to protect onlookers from its uncontrollable and uncontainable fluids. The abject aspects of our existence, according to Kristeva "beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (*Powers of Horror* 4). Childbirth both fascinates and horrifies its audience in these novels. It draws attention to the blurring of internal and external physical boundaries between self and other. These narratives depict the need of others to exert control over the birthing woman to maintain authority over the uncontrollability of her body.

Birth as depicted in the fiction published around this period has focused on birthing women under male domination and threatened with violence. Consistent literary and cultural images of birth as horrifying, dominated by threat of powerful men and the medical establishment can be argued to contribute to a wider residual representation that deems birth dangerous and requiring control, and not the empowering life event that it can be. Ruddick may have articulated it best by saying,

> In maternal practice there is a real, unromantic, material basis for a revisionist history of the body, both realistic and celebratory. To tell a maternal history, it is necessary to look again, with trusting eyes, at sexuality and birth. (206)

To return to the texts examined in Section 1, these narratives both celebrate birth and are trusting of the woman's body to complete this complex physiological and emotional task. What is interesting is the contrast between the engagement with childbirth in Section 1 and those texts in Section 2. Contrasting texts enable critique on contested ideas around birth and power. It is in the analysis of childbirth in literature through its various manifestations that a more extensive understanding of the literary "traditions" (21) that defined Poston's work can be done, in order to examine the implications around late twentieth-century ideas of women more broadly in childbirth and how they continue to impact how we view birth in the twenty-first century.

Section 3: Emergent Qualities in Fiction on the Maternal
The Girls Lori Lansens (2006)

I argue that *The Girls* by Lori Lansens is "emergent" (Williams, "Base and Superstructure" 11) for the ways in which the novel asserts the maternal body and the embodied aspect of childbirth. *The Girls* explores and destablises the condition of pregnancy, while reinforcing notions of attachment. It also uses the technique of the contrasting birth scene and places the birthing mother within a matrilineal history. This novel, a fictional memoir of "the oldest surviving craniopagus twins" (1) in Baldoon County, Canada, may be read in terms of disability studies (Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies" and "Misfits") as well as studies of the female grotesque (Russo). Helen Davies reads Lansens' novel in terms of conjoinment as metaphor. Conjoined sisters can point to alternative understandings of difference, sameness and unity between feminists as women who are part of a collective group (Davies 410). While her article reads the concept of conjoined twins as possible metaphor for a diverse yet united feminist sisterhood, her research also illuminates alternative ways of reading *The Girls* as normalising "connection or interdependence" (145). Davies points to the aspects I read as the emergent qualities of Lansens novel.

The fictional memoir that shapes the narrative structure of *The Girls* was the initial idea of Rose, who relates the diagnosis of an inoperable brain aneurysm that will kill the twins suddenly and within a year. She asks her sister Ruby to contribute chapters although each twin does not read each other's work. The reader can thereby access the memoir of both narrators who describe their conjoined experience in similar, yet different ways. Rose and Ruby have one sexual experience with a teenage neighbour when they are seventeen. Rose becomes pregnant and decides to keep the pregnancy and adopt the child out to a couple, as her and Ruby's condition is terminal. Rose's sense of loss and grief for the daughter she does

not know permeates this novel, which shows emergent qualities in the way it explores pregnancy and childbirth.

The novel firstly destabilises the two-in-one model of pregnancy through the use of the mother experiencing a conjoined life. Iris Marion Young's exploration of pregnancy as a state in which "the transparent unity of the self dissolves" (Young 47) takes on new meaning in *The Girls*. There is a multiplicity of embodied experiences in this text, first through the experience of Rose who is the stronger upright twin:

> I have carried my sister like an infant, since I was a baby myself, Ruby's tiny thighs astride my hip, my arm supporting her posterior, her arm forever around my neck. Ruby is my sister. And strangely, undeniably, my child. (3)

While there are seemingly two infants at one stage—Rose's frail, dependent twin and her own growing foetus—there are also two 'mothers' in this pregnancy, as they share biological systems as well as the physical and emotional bond. Although this is Rose's pregnancy, Ruby must endure everything that affects Rose physically and is influenced emotionally by the pregnancy. Rose explains, "I shared my pregnancy with Ruby in surprising ways. She was affected by my hormones, of course, weepy and exhausted" (209). When Rose can no longer walk with the weight of her baby and her sister, both sisters are bedridden. When Rose is shocked to find a "hump" (222) still in her abdomen after her daughter is born, for a moment, she is terrified that it is an unknown twin, and that she will have to give birth again. She is fearful not only for her own physical ability to birth again but for Ruby as, "I knew my sister could not survive childbirth again" (222). Davies writes that the physical and emotional bond that Ruby and Rose share within their conjoinment demonstrates how

> the potential transgression of the borderlines of subjecthood and identity becomes heightened in the case of conjoined twins. A recurring motif in historical representations of conjoinment has been the quandary of individuality; does this

> body house one person, or two? Where should the boundary between identities be drawn? (Davies 412-13)

The novel forces a rethinking of how we perceive pregnancy as an embodied experience, of a growing of one life within another, and the intersection between joy and tension that this will bring. It challenges neo-liberal assumptions that a separate, individual identity is best and what Mielle Chandler describes as being "unencumbered" (272) by the dependence of others. However, the view that Rose takes of this interdependence between herself and her sister is, "if such things were to be, I'd live a thousand lives as me, to be loved so exponentially" (1). Lansens' novel focuses on the gift of attachment rather than its detriment and, applied to the experience of pregnancy, this novel can assist to challenge the notion that separation is the ultimate aim of the infant from its mother.

The Girls demonstrates emergent qualities in the way it not only comments on pregnancy but sets up a birth scene that depicts dominant representations of hospitalised childbirth, then provides an alternative birth scene that serves to critique the practices of the first birth and the treatment of the birthing woman. The contrasting birth scene, which I have recognised as an emergent quality in the representation of childbirth, is a technique also used in *The Midwife's Daughter*, *The Birth House* and *Room*. Rose's descriptions of her pregnancy touch on the idea of learning about childbirth from books. She says, "of the few details I had read, I recalled a number—thirty-six—a story about a woman who'd had thirty-six hours of labour" (218). What Rose remembers of these books are not helpful tips but a horrifying detail. There are echoes in *The Girls* of birth as a horrifying event (Poston 21) especially in the description of the birth of Ruby and Rose by their unprepared teenage mother. Rose narrates this story, based on recollections by Aunt Lovey who was the nurse on duty and eventually adopted the twins. She describes the doctor examining her mother:

> The doctor snapped on a latex glove, pried apart our mother's knees, and stabbed between her goose-flesh legs. After a moment he extricated himself . . . I like to think she was not terrorized by the invasion of Dr Ruttle's finger. (24)

Later in the scene, Rose writes,

> there was a sound from our mother, a spine-chilling scream, as if she'd just had her arms amputated in a horrible sneak attack. And then another scream, the legs gone now too. (27)

This scene sounds very much like it fits into Poston's categories of twentieth-century birth scenes. There is horror, there is surprise, the birthing woman emitting sounds she never has before, and the description is akin to a war scene in a similar way to Joe's description of Grace's labour in *The Midwife's Daughter*. Yet Lansens uses Rose's own birth scene to challenge this concept of birth as dominant. In this birth scene, Rose overcomes fear and doubt. There is no horror. Rose is not acted upon by other people, she is not a patient, she is not prodded or examined. Aunt Lovey acts as midwife during the homebirth, supported by her sisters and nieces who are there to give physical support to Rose's spine as she both holds her twin and pushes down to give birth. There are numerous descriptions in Rose's memoir describing the physical limitations of the conjoined experience and the medical supervision she and Ruby are under. These notions of disability and surveillance are challenged by the second birth scene narrated in the novel, where there is "exquisite" pain (218) and Rose "felt more afraid than I ever had before" (218) but, in contrast to Poston's findings, there is no horror in this scene but there is self-belief, encouragement and physical power. Lansens draws on the traditional model of homebirth and describes "five women encircling" (218) Rose on a bed in a country house, but the similarities end there.

Aunt Lovey tells her daughter:

> "Your cervix isn't dilating and you need to dilate. Do you understand, Rose?

"Yes."

"Imagine that your cervix is a flower bud."

"A flower bud."

"Visualise that bud opening, the petals unfolding. Spreading. Wider and wider and still wider. Visualize your beautiful baby emerging from the centre of that perfect, open flower. Can you do that, Rose?"

"I can."

I did. And found myself amazed at what a person can will herself to do. (220)Not only is the narrator of this birth scene a participant, something that Poston was hoping to see in the late 1970s, but Rose is also writing her own birth story through her memoir. She is the subject of her own story, and its creator. She frames the story as she wants it presented. This was missing from twentieth-century writing about childbirth and something that feminist scholars such as Poston believed to be vital to the wider feminist project of giving women an authentic voice through literature. It is the opportunity that writers take to re-write scenes of childbirth, to re-imagine them away from the "barbaric" (Poston 21) acts of Poston's narrators that will make emergent maternal fiction.

In addition to the emergent qualities present in the representation of the conjoined pregnancy and the contrasting birth scene, Lansens foregrounds a matrilineal history for Ruby and Rose. Their memoir gives precedence to the stories of the mothers in their town and the ways in which these mothers, both biological and other female care-giving figures, assist to develop the identity of the twins as they write their memoir. Lansens presents each birth in the novel alongside a death, and shows how joy and grief, life and loss are woven together in the story. Rose details in her memoir the surprise force of the tornado "that touched down in Baldoon County on the day Ruby and I were born" (15). The surprise labour of Rose and Ruby's teen mother within this catastrophic tornado that shuts down the power at the hospital,

forces a woman who had been frantically searching the building for her missing son to help the teenager deliver her baby in the dark. This impromptu midwife is Mrs. Merkel, whose son was never found, and she haunts Rose's writing as the forever grieving mother. In Rose's memoir the grieving mother is a figure that appears multiple times, alongside Mrs. Merkel. Rose's own mother is said to have "lost her mind" (31) with the way "her twin girls taken from her with so little regard" (31) and to have died not long after the birth. Rose's own birth story is shadowed by a gradually deteriorating Uncle Stash who "grew emaciated" (214) while the women in his family were at Lovey's sister's house awaiting the secret birth of Rose's child. In an ironic twist of the plot, it is the beloved Aunt Lovey who dies in a car accident before her frail husband. He lasts just one week before he, too, dies and the twins are orphaned in their late adolescence. Stories of life in this novel rely on stories of death or loss to frame them and provide shadow against the light, contrasting in the same way that the combined memoir of Ruby and Rose celebrate their life while preparing for their death.

Ruby's contributions to the memoir fill in gaps in Rose's story but also help to provide the doubling that occurs throughout the novel, love and loss, life and death, separation and conjoinment. This doubling of life and death also roots "the Girls" (2), as they are locally named, to Baldoon County. This town holds their history as girls who grow into womanhood, encompassing experiences of sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth. Their history and the birth of Rose's daughter is told within the wider context of their own birth and the stories of mothers in their town. Its importance in giving mother figures a solid foundation as fictional characters is one emergent quality that is clearly present in *The Girls*.

Conclusion

The examination of narratives and specific birth scenes across eight examples of fiction clearly demonstrate that writers have had an engagement with residual images of childbirth,

such as the role of the midwife, and childbirth as an act of heroism. These manifestations of mid-twentieth century representations of childbirth are residual because they have made subtle but critical changes to the dominant traditions articulated by the scholarship of Carol Poston and Tess Cosslett regarding twentieth-century representations of literary characters in childbirth. Cosslett's historical "crone" (31) and "witch" (33) are now evident in a literary figure at the turning point of traditional woman-centred care and the "technocratic" (Kitzinger 2) birth culture of the medical system. Poston's "heroine" is seen within the eight literary examples in this chapter as a figure operating within a larger and more powerful cultural structure that takes into account a woman's race and status in relation to dominating men. The heroine is more likely now to be depicted as alone and unassisted while overcoming physical and psychological threat. She is heroic not by entering the life stage of motherhood but by overcoming threats to her safety to birth using her own inner strength. Childbirth remains the focus of horror at times, and points to evidence that horror and abjection at the uncontained boundaries of the maternal body remain a dominant representation of childbirth into the twenty-first century. Emergent representations of childbirth focus on the literary technique of contrast to present two birth scenes that provide critique on the treatment of women in childbirth.

Authors of the twenty-first century are using the literary technique of the contrasting birth scene to describe counter-narratives of childbirth for new audiences. Texts such as *The Midwife's Daughter*, *The Birth House* and *Room,* alongside Lansens' *The Girls* exhibit an openness to new interpretations of motherhood and childbirth experiences. While rooted in the use of dominant and residual images of childbirth, the emergent quality of the contrasting birth scenes demonstrates new possibilities of representing the maternal body and the work of labour and childbirth.

CHAPTER 4 MILK AND SALVATION: BREASTFEEDING

This chapter provides a close analysis of a selection of novels published in the early twenty-first century that focus on the relationship between a breastfeeding mother and her child. These novels show a concern with the opinions of those outside the mother/child dyad and the ways in which the opinions of others about the mother's ability to raise her child in a socially appropriate manner is influenced by her breastfeeding practice. This section begins with a summary of early Christian iconography that featured the Virgin Mother breastfeeding the infant Christ. This image, while not used in any conscious means by the authors of any of the novels featured in this chapter, is a residual image of motherhood that is drawn upon in all these texts. The aim of this chapter is to explore how this residual image of nurturing motherhood has been utilised, challenged and critiqued. Of particular interest to my analysis are recurring themes within the selected novels around captivity, threat, sacrifice and maternal agency, and how these themes may relate to the image of the Madonna of the Milk. I will argue that the prevalence of these themes points to the changing and contested nature of contemporary motherhood as presented in twenty-first-century literature.

The novels chosen for close analysis in this chapter are Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap* (2008), Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010) and Lissa M. Cowan's *Milk Fever* (2015). These novels were selected due to the strong focus in each of them on breastfeeding as well as the portrayal of the relationship between the breastfeeding mother and her child. All three novels were published after the year 2000, which enables my analysis to be framed by late twentieth-century feminist and literary theory and to explore future directions for literature on the maternal. While *The Slap* and *Room* are set in contemporary Western culture and are therefore more easily comparable to one another, *Milk Fever* was included due to its focus on breastmilk and its exploration of ideals of mothering, despite it being the only example of historical fiction in this chapter. In addition, Cowan's novel was published by Andrea

O'Reilly's Demeter Press which actively seeks out feminist mothering topics in both its fiction and non-fiction publications. It is relevant to my study of representations of the maternal to conduct an analysis of fiction on the maternal that has been framed for a feminist audience and marketed as such.

My analysis shows that, beyond drawing upon concepts of sacrifice and nurture associated with medieval Christian imagery of motherhood, these three novels also explore the views of characters outside the breastfeeding dyad who see the practice as unreasonable and in need of limitations. The mothers in these novels often find themselves in situations where a physical or social boundary has been placed between themselves and others. They are limited in their freedom, often threatened and told their breastfeeding is detrimental to their children. The analytical section of the chapter begins with a close reading of breastfeeding in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*.

I utilise *Beloved* in this chapter to demonstrate how this text highlights the boundaries under which the breastfeeding mother in all the selected novels are contained. *Beloved's* use of breastfeeding hinges on a key episode in the plot: the violent extraction of Sethe's breastmilk in what is often called the "milking scene" (Humann 67). This scene highlights arguments in this chapter about the ways in which the breastfeeding mothers in this selection of novels are threatened or encouraged to lose their milk. The Madonna of the Milk, the Mother of Christ with spiritual milk to nourish all who follow her Son, is an image that is challenged in these novels. After a close reading of *The Slap*, *Room* and *Milk Fever*, the conclusion to this chapter explores reasons why this threat to breastfeeding may be the case and argues that this selection of texts point not to an emergent fiction on the maternal, but creative forms challenging the dominant discourse on the maternal body, an important pre-emergent step. I argue that the prevalence of the theme of containment across the three selected twenty-first-century novels, as well as *Beloved*, point to evidence that fiction on the

maternal has not yet reached an emergent stage but is working creatively within hegemonic frameworks about motherhood.

Residual, Dominant and Emergent Images of Breastfeeding: A Cultural Materialist Framework

Breastfeeding is not a common occurrence in twentieth-century fiction, yet despite its infrequency, a number of similarities have appeared between fictional narratives that place a focus on what breastfeeding means to a mother and the relationship between the breastfeeding mother and her child. The two most relevant elements of Williams' cultural materialist framework for my critique of contemporary literary representations of breastfeeding is that of the "residual" and the "emergent" ("Base and Superstructure" 9-10) image of the breastfeeding mother. Williams' concept of the residual refers to an element that:

> has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus, certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue-cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. (Williams, "Dominant" 236-37)

Williams' definition points to subtleties in the understanding of each cultural production, as a means by which to understand the complexities of a culture and the multiple meanings it may give to a cultural practice such as breastfeeding over time. In contrast, as I have been using this term, Williams defines emergent as being those "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created" (Williams, "Dominant" 237).

My reading of the selected novels looks for aspects of the breastfeeding mother that resonate with the qualities of the Madonna of the Milk, namely her ability to nourish and comfort her child and others through her breastfeeding, and the way in which nourishing her child offers her spiritual or emotional comfort. I then look at the ways in which the breastfeeding of a child, particularly a son, might be a path of salvation for the mother in the novel, in the way that the Madonna of the Milk was saved spiritually by her son. I will argue in this chapter that this Marian image is a culturally residual concept of motherhood and the qualities of mothers that we expect. Breastfeeding is seen within this image as powerful and positive. However, the themes that are noted within my selection of novels all explore the concept of the breastfeeding mother as contained and threatened or misunderstood. She may achieve a type of salvation through her son, but it is not considered important or reasonable to others within the narratives. The most important finding in my analyses of these texts is the prevailing theme of the loss of milk. Each mother in these novels loses her milk either through force or through an encouragement of weaning by others.

The Madonna of the Milk: A Residual Image of the Breastfeeding Mother

Scholarship on contemporary breastfeeding practices, such as that undertaken by Alison Bartlett in her 2005 text *Breastwork,* frames the discussion in this section on the binary between the sexualised breast and the maternal breast. *Breastwork* refers to earlier representations of nursing women that work as residual images of breastfeeding by informing current practices in subtle ways. The nurturing and sacrificial aspects of breastfeeding can be traced in pictorial form to a particular medieval representation of the Virgin Mother and the Christ Child, known in English as the Madonna of the Milk or Our Lady of the Milk.

The earliest known pictorial representation of the Madonna of the Milk is more commonly known by its Greek title *Panagia Galaktotrofoussa*, translated as *Milk-Giver* (see

fig.1). This icon depicts the Virgin Mary feeding an infant Christ with one exposed breast and nipple (Brooks 132-34). This image was found in Christian monastic communities in Egypt and Jerusalem from the 6th century. The *Panagia Galaktotrofoussa* spread as a popular Marian image across the Eastern Christian church in the Middle East, Greece, Serbia and Russia until around the 18th century.

Fig.1. *Mother of God the Milk-Giver*. 6th century, Hilandar Monastery, Mt Athos. "Milk-Giver Icon". *Icon Reader.* www.iconreader.wordpress.com, July 3, 2011.

Icons were used within the early Church as pictorial representations of important events or people. Another use of icons has been as teaching guides to the faithful (Prevelakis). It is for this purpose that the image of the Milk-Giver may have been formed as an icon, in response to heresies that Christ was human but not divine or else as a representation of spiritual nourishment (Frost 71-77). This veneration of the image of the breastfeeding Virgin Mary was brought to Western Europe via Crusaders from the Holy Land (see fig. 2). The image,

also known as the Madonna Lactans, Madonna del Latte or Madonna of Humility reached the peak of its popularity in Catholic Europe during the Renaissance.

Fig.2. Anonymous, *The Virgin and Child*, Southern Netherlands, c. 1500', in J.P.Filedt Kok (ed.), Early Netherlandish Paintings, online coll. Cat. Amsterdam: Hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.6629

Threatened by famine, this image gave comfort to the Church's followers that spiritual sustenance was available from the Mother of Christ through the Church (Miles, "God's Love, Mother's Milk" 22). Marina Warner, in her study *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary,* explains the multiple meanings of breastmilk for a medieval audience:

> Milk symbolized the full humanity of Jesus at one level, but it also belonged in an ancient and complex symbolic language. For milk was a crucial metaphor of the gift of life. Without it, a child had little or no chance of survival . . . the milk of the Mother of God became even more highly charged with the symbolism of life, for the life of life's own source depended on it. When the medieval mystic meditated on the

> Incarnation, he saw not only a mother nursing her baby—an event in historical time—but an eternal mystery whereby the Christian soul is perpetually nourished and sustained by grace, of which Mary's milk is a sublime epiphany. (197)

Mary's milk had a role to play in emphasising the spiritual nourishment available by the Church to its followers, while also focusing on the humanity of Jesus (Warner 201). Alonzo Cano's 1650 painting *The Lactation of St Bernard* draws on this idea by depicting a key event in the hagiography of twelfth century monastic St Bernard of Clairvaux. According to the story, while kneeling in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary in prayer, the statue dripped three drops of milk into his mouth (Warner 201). Paintings of this scene often depict the milk emerging from the statue's exposed breast as a stream instead (see Appendix A). Apart from the idea of spiritual sustenance from the Mother of Christ, the image of the Madonna of the Milk may also have been created as a form of social education to ensure women breastfed their own children to keep them untainted from possibly undesirable traits of their working-class wet nurses. The image of the breastfeeding Mary depicts her in humble peasant clothing (Warner 184-85) and was an image more accessible to ordinary women than the crowned image of Mary Queen of Heaven surrounded by angels that had been popular in the period just before the Madonna Lactans (Warner 108). In Margaret Miles' analysis of the meaning and reception of this image, she writes:

> religious paintings were the media images of medieval people, informing their self-images and their ideas of relationship, God, and the world in strong and immediate ways." (Miles, "The Virgin's One Bare Breast" 201)

It was, however, this image of the Virgin Mother with her bare breast that was designed to cause mixed reactions in viewers:

> Nudity or partial nudity in religious paintings creates tensions of two kinds in viewers. First, there is a tension between cultural and natural meanings. The bare-breasted

> Virgin, for example, evokes visual associations that emphasize her similarity with other women . . . secondly, nudity in religious paintings creates a tension between erotic attraction and religious meaning (203).

Nudity in religious art must strike a balance between enticing the viewer's interest in the subject using the bare body and keeping that interest in order to communicate a message, but the use of eroticism must not overpower the religious message which must always be clear and stronger than the erotic one. This was done in the images of the nursing Mary by changing her breast size or position so that it was different to what was considered an erotic breast at the time which was small and high. Her clothes are not shown in disarray as with a romantic encounter but kept in position. The other side of her chest is flat, so that that one bared breast looks like "an appendage" rather than a glimpse of cleavage (Miles, "The Virgin's One Bare Breast" 204). These images of the nursing Mary were all commissioned and painted by men. Miles can find no evidence of any painted by women, so it is the male view of the nursing mother of Jesus. As men's images, they express and attempt to "master" a cultural situation. Because of this, and the period of famine and disease in which this image was shown, "ambivalence" was the response of the viewer, especially mothers. It could cause guilt for mothers who chose to use wet nurses, or wet nurses who did not take their duty responsibly. Miles writes that the ambivalence experienced by a historical female audience would have found that "The nourishing breast was simultaneously a symbol of threat and of comfort, focusing on a pervasive, chronic anxiety over nourishment" (204).

It was not only guilt that this image could induce in women, but a sense of the unreachable reality of Mary the woman:

> Unlike actual women who might or might not be acceptable mothers, the Virgin represented the fantasy of a totally good mother . . . Mary's humility, obedience, and submissiveness in unquestioningly offering her body as shelter and nourishment for

> the Christ child must have been part of the message intended by male commissioners and painters. The Virgin was presented as model for actual women. (205)

Despite the potential this image had of making mothers feel inadequate, Miles believes that the image of the Nursing Virgin in particular might have struck some women as representative of the power of the nursing woman "to conceive, to nourish, shelter, and sustain human life" (205), and that was a powerful concept in a culture that was often stricken by famine and disease. But it was a power that the dominant culture wanted kept firmly within the private home. In the words of Julia Kristeva, the Virgin Mary developed into "this ideal that no individual woman could possibly embody" (Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 141). Miles argues that for the majority of Renaissance women, the clearest message they received from this image was not how similar they were to the Virgin, but how different, and this was not from the paintings but from the sermons and preaching and religious texts of the time that the Virgin was a model for all women, albeit an impossible one to reach. It is because of this dualism that Miles concludes her essay with "Images of the Virgin with one bare breast both formulate and attempt to control one of the most awesome powers of women, the power to nourish" (207). For Iris Marion Young, the maternal power present in the image of the Madonna of the Milk has been separated into two separate parts: the mother and the sexualised woman. Of the image of the Virgin Mary, Young believes that:

> this is the primary image of power, female power. To be purity and goodness itself, the origin of life, the source to which the living man owes his substance—this is an awesome power . . . But it is bought at the cost of sexuality. The Madonna must be a virgin mother . . . In Western logic woman is the seat of such oppositional categorization, for patriarchal logic defines an exclusive border between motherhood and sexuality. The virgin or the whore, the pure or the impure, the nurturer or the

> seducer is either asexual mother or sexualized beauty, but one precludes the other. (Young 185)

This image of the nursing Virgin Mother with one bare breast highlighted this collision of the maternal and the sexual. Religious imagery in Europe eventually replaced bare flesh with clothing, the Council of Trent in 1563 deeming nudity inappropriate in the visual representation of Christ, his mother or other religious figures (Miles, "The Virgin's One Bare Breast" 203). In the words of Marina Warner, as the end of the Renaissance drew near, "It became indecorous for the Virgin to bare her breast" (206).

The image of The Madonna of the Milk eventually waned in Renaissance Europe, but when Spanish settlers landed in Florida, they built the first shrine in the United States of America dedicated to Mary in the early 1600s, known as the Shrine of our Lady of La Leche (Diocese of St Augustine). The image never gained popularity again and other Marian images took dominance over the centuries (Warner 207). It was an image of breastfeeding created for two specific purposes—first, to teach the early Church that Jesus Christ was truly human as well as truly divine (Frost 71-77), and second, to reiterate the Church's medieval position that a mother should breastfeed her own children (Miles, "The Virgin's One Bare Breast" 204). Yet in the careful crafting of this image was the realisation among the European Renaissance painters of the dual nature of the feminine breast—as a source of spiritual and maternal comfort and as a provocative image (Warner 206). This binary remains problematic to contemporary breastfeeding practices in the West. According to Bartlett, breastfeeding is a culturally informed practice. It may be a biologically natural function, but society expects that function to be performed in a particular way, with a particular set of attributing behaviours. Bartlett summarises the practice of breastfeeding as:

> In a very fundamental sense, breastfeeding practices have always been affected by the kinds of values, attitudes, histories and knowledge currently circulating, rather than being a homogenous practice we all do naturally. (13)

This chapter will expand on Bartlett's work on contemporary understandings of breastfeeding practices as it is manifested in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century fiction. I begin with the notion that this residual image of the Madonna Lactans re-appears in contemporary narratives that feature breastfeeding, as Mary the mother of Jesus in all her cultural manifestations is the most powerful Western image of motherhood. Of particular interest to the following discussion on some examples of literary breastfeeding is the breastfeeding of a son, the concept of mothering, and breastfeeding as salvation for the mother. The analysis begins with a discussion of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a novel which presents breastfeeding as embodying numerous layers of understanding and relationship for the mother and her children. The remainder of the texts in this chapter are grouped thematically.

Beloved Toni Morrison (1987)

This section explores the multiple meanings of breastmilk as a key image in *Beloved*, a text in which "Morrison emphatically foregrounds the mother's body and particularly the breastfeeding subject" (Frampton 145). I argue that making a critique of literary works such as Morrison's is a step toward a fuller understanding of not only literary but also cultural responses to lactating subjects. The breadth of Toni Morrison's work that has spanned from her first published novel (*The Bluest Eye* in 1970) to her latest work (*God Help the Child* in 2015) often focuses on marginalised or poor mothers and their relationship with other women in their communities. *Beloved* placed at the forefront of its narrative of slavery and freedom a woman in the child-bearing years of her life, and the constraints slavery placed on her understanding of her maternal body and her identity as mother. Sethe's past literally comes

back to haunt her in the form of a young women, a spectre of the toddler she killed in order to protect her child from becoming enslaved a second time. In *Beloved*, the meaning of Sethe's breastmilk and those who lacked access to their mother's milk is symbolic of the story of an enslaved community adrift by the breaking of ancestral and family ties. In Sethe we see the inverse of the Madonna with more than enough spiritual milk for all the faithful. Sethe recognises the hunger of a child for its mother as both physical and emotional but cannot meet that need due to the horrific constraints of slavery.

Likewise, the practice of breastfeeding in twenty-first-century Western culture is not simply about infant feeding, but rather it remains an intersection of cultural meanings regarding the mother-child relationship, agency over the female body, and the sexualisation of the breast. As Bernice Hausman argues:

> when we ignore the specificity of these embodied activities of maternity we have difficulty seeing how maternity is, for most women, a profoundly embodied experience . . . breastfeeding in public has become an activity women must argue is not obscene or exhibitionistic. (276)

The breastfeeding mother today is often aware of the ways in which her breasts make meaning in her society and how that meaning reflects upon her own self and her mothering practice. Although current Western cultural attitudes toward breastfeeding may run across a spectrum of opinions—from the acceptance of breastfeeding as a practice right through to its rejection—most value the choice and resources given to mothers in the twenty-first century about the ways they can provide nourishment to their babies. In *Beloved*, slave women such as Sethe cannot make these same types of choices, as they are severely restricted or non-existent to them. The ability to survive the conditions of slavery and the opportunity to escape or be freed is paramount in the minds of slave mothers; the option to nurse one's child is taken away.

Morrison's novel cannot be read without considering its focus on race, history and slavery as well as the author's intention to give voice to the violence and trauma experienced by three generations of slaves. The novel was inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who was captured in Cincinnati in 1856 and who killed her two-year-old daughter with a butcher's knife rather than have her returned to a life of slavery (Weisenburger). This analysis does not attempt to simplify the complexities of this novel by drawing neat lines between breastmilk as used in *Beloved* and women's experiences of breastfeeding in a free society. The lactating body of Sethe, though signifying commonalities to the lactating bodies of mothers across cultures and time periods, is also a racialised and historicised body. The argument emphasised in this analysis does not sideline race or history but focuses on the key image of breastmilk and its many meanings both within the context of Sethe's enslaved experience and within our own contemporary culture.

Beloved moves between two time periods: Sethe's present life in the house of her freed mother-in-law Baby Suggs, and her "re-memory" (Morrison 43) of her experiences as an escaped slave. The occurrence of breastmilk will be analysed in the order it appears in the narrative in order to track the development and significance of this image. Born to a slave mother and an unknown father, Sethe endures much loss in her girlhood. Much of Sethe's early sense of loss is centred on the lack of access to her mother and to her mother's milk. Her memories are vague, remembering "only song and dance. Not even her own mother" (37). Sethe's mother was allowed to nurse her only for a few weeks before being sent back to work. She was then nursed by another woman, remembering:

> Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left. (236)

Sethe cannot forget this hunger for her absent mother, the hunger to know her and be nursed by her, to drink her until she is satisfied. This need troubles Sethe, especially when she becomes a mother herself. Due to her enslavement, Sethe's mother was denied any authority over her nursing relationship with her child. She was denied that ability to choose when and where and for how long she could breastfeed her child. In the culture of *Beloved,* the ability to remain with one's child for as long as possible and breastfeed that child for as long as the mother chooses would ensure their safety and health as well as allow for bonding time. It was a luxury and a dream denied to enslaved women.

When Sethe becomes a mother, she finds the conditions of her Kentucky plantation, "Sweet Home" (74), slightly more favourable than her own mother had experienced. Sethe is allowed to nurse her children and to have them with her while she works. Her ability to nurse them bonds her fiercely to her children, yet she feels that she has not truly satisfied them until she can guarantee their freedom from a life of slavery. Sethe is eight months pregnant with her fourth child when she and the slaves of Sweet Home plan an escape. Her three children have been sent away days earlier in the care of other runaway slaves. The youngest of the three is a girl not yet two years old, and Sethe sends instructions for the breastfed child not to be nursed by another woman until Sethe meets them in Cincinnati:

> I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her ahead . . . Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. (19)

No woman is allowed to replace Sethe's role as mother and source of nourishment, even under temporary yet difficult circumstances. The relationship she has with her daughter is expressed by Sethe in terms of her ability to breastfeed her, and in this nursing relationship, she feels particularly attuned to her child's needs, both physically and emotionally. This is in

direct contrast to Sethe's own relationship with her mother, and her own unquenched desire to know her mother's milk in that intimate nursing relationship. Breasts engorged and heavily pregnant, Sethe waits for an opportunity to escape Sweet Home. It is while waiting for a safe opportunity to escape that she experiences one of the most traumatic episodes in her young life. Scholars sometimes refers to it as "the milking scene" (Hummann 67) or a "theft" (Gaard 425; Koolish 422), but Michele Mock articulates the horror and cruelty of the assault by calling it "rape" (125). Sethe is ambushed by the schoolteacher and his nephews. In her passionate recounting of the story to Paul D, Sethe tells him:

> "After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it . . . them boys found out I told on 'em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."
>
> "They used cowhide on you?"
>
> "And they took my milk."
>
> "They beat you and you was pregnant?"
>
> "And they took my milk!" (19-20)

Paul D's questions precipitate Sethe's ability to verbalise the anger and frustration she has carried within her since the traumatic event. It was not just that they beat her. It was not just that they could have injured the baby with this beating. It was not just that this ambush could have foiled her escape plan. It was because they stole the milk that she was keeping safe for her daughter, so that her child would recognise that Sethe was her mother and no one else, so that her daughter would not have her hunger satisfied by anyone else. Sethe is desperate to ensure her own daughter does not experience the pain of being separated from her mother and her mother's milk the way she did as an infant.

The schoolteacher takes notes using ink that Sethe has made while he looks on and instructs his two "boys with mossy teeth" (83) to hold her down and suck out the milk. For Frampton, breastmilk, among other bodily fluids, works in this novel as a way of "opposing the ink with which the slave masters inscribe their pseudo-scientific truth" (151). But schoolteacher senses a threat in Sethe's embodied maternity and aims to steal from her "in a code of domination" (Liscio 34) what she considers to be most precious about her maternal body—her capacity to nourish her children, to know them intimately and to satiate their hunger for mother love. Through Sethe's assault by the schoolteacher's nephews and the reaction of runaway servant Amy Denver to her leaking breastmilk (97), Sethe's milk is positioned as abject, alongside her enslaved, feminine, maternal body.

Sethe is horrified by the schoolteacher's nephews and their crime, and according to Mock, Sethe is also disgusted that her body does not refuse their milking of her breasts, an uncontrollable physical reaction. The punishment by schoolteacher further depicts his ambivalence about exactly what she is. To him, Sethe is a volatile combination of black, female and maternal property requiring his authority and control. Her body is sexually arousing, disgusting and fascinating to him all at once. Michele Mock writes of the power struggle between Sethe and the schoolteacher, and how Sethe "views her children as an integral part of herself in an implication of ownership." Mock continues:

> Her children rightfully belong to her. Yet this essential maternal instinct is corrupted when viewed in the context of slavery. For a slave cannot 'own.' Not her individuality. Not her children. Not her milk. Nothing is sacred for those enslaved." (Mock n.p.)

Not only do the schoolteacher and his nephews take her precious milk, abusing and invading her body, but they also undermine any authority she believes that she has over her breasts as a part of herself—to nourish her babies and not to be used as a sexual object. An analysis of

Morrison's use of breastmilk in *Beloved* can function to critique contemporary views of the breast despite its main focus as a narrative exploring racial history.

The novel asks pertinent questions about the meanings of breastfeeding relationships. The ghost of Beloved eventually tries to starve Sethe and drive everyone in her life away. In the attempt to satisfy her spectral child, Sethe realises that this is a hunger that will not be satiated; it is a void that will never be filled as there has been too much absence in Beloved's existence. Beloved's shortened earthly life has created an unquenchable hunger in her ghostly state for her mother's attention, attention given to Denver in her ironic statement that "I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (242). Lynda Koolish sums up Sethe's maternal struggle in light of her breastmilk:

> The extraordinary unquenchable thirst and hunger of Beloved is the mirror of Sethe's obsession with getting milk to her daughter, enough milk, milk she alone could provide . . . Sethe's breasts did not—could not—contain milk enough to feed all who hungered . . . Yet the central paradox of the novel is that so great is Sethe's own deprivation that she cannot satiate even one person—that ravenous aspect of herself which is Beloved. (425)

What Koolish has highlighted is an irony of the image of the Madonna of the Milk. While the Virgin Mother may have enough milk to satisfy all who hunger, Morrison demonstrates through her narrative the black, enslaved, abused mother whose milk is not enough. The image of the breast in *Beloved* is the contested site of emotional hunger, satisfaction and maternal love, as well as a means of autonomy or oppression.

Beloved's hunger for her mother's milk mirrors Sethe's hunger for her own mother. Yet Beloved's ability to be satiated means danger to Sethe's own life and any power she has begun to reclaim over it. She realizes that she has only one living relationship out of the four children she gave birth to and that is to Denver, a relationship she must save. Sethe

experiences an ongoing struggle in the novel to maintain authority over her body, physically assaulted by slave owners and emotionally drained by the horrors of slavery and its impact upon her family. She has a keen hunger to have her body for herself and her children on her own terms. At the same time, she senses her lack of access to her mother's breasts and to her mother's maternal love as deep loss. These two elements open her to possession by Beloved's ghost who has a physical impact upon Sethe (61). Sethe's eventual exorcism of Beloved from her life is her attempt once again to make a claim of autonomy on her own life. *Beloved* is not only a narrative of historical slavery but one that explores the ways in which the breastfeeding mother's body can become layered with various meanings: gendered, racial and historical. Using the framework of a slavery narrative, the novel explores the embodied maternal experience and how deeply the maternal breast is linked to a mother-child bond. It highlights the hunger of children for the affection of their mother and the extremes to which this loss can be felt.

Nourishment, Salvation and Captivity: *Milk Fever* (2015), *Room* (2010) and *The Slap* (2008)

Three twenty-first-century novels are distinctive in their portrayal of breastfeeding in the decades after the publication of Morrison's *Beloved*. What draws these three novels together is the theme of spiritual nourishment and salvation. For Rosie, Ma and Armande, the nourishment and sustenance of a child at their breast is the catalyst for an incredible transformation in their lives. They move from hopelessness and crushing grief to purpose and confidence. Mothering these children and watching them flourish and grow in turn helps these mothers to speak out, to speak their minds and hearts. Rosie in *The Slap* and Ma from the novel *Room* are depicted as practicing extended breastfeeding, where they feed their infants beyond the first twelve months. Armande is a literate wet nurse to the poor and

provider of support to new mothers in the historical novel *Milk Fever*. She came to wet nursing as an altruistic practice to help her overcome the loss of her baby. In each of the three novels, the wider society rejects the mothering practice of breastfeeding on the mothers' own terms and questions their morality. Although the breastfed sons in *The Slap* and *Room* offer a sense of salvation to the mother, it is not enough to win them acceptance among a society where men dominate with violence.

These texts draw on the residual image of the Madonna of the Milk, a woman who experiences spiritual salvation and elevation through the mothering of her son. Where these texts differ from this medieval image is how secondary characters in these three narratives do not fully understand this sense of salvation inherent in the breastfeeding experience. The first thought of characters outside the mother-child dyad is to stop this breastfeeding behaviour, to limit its inappropriateness and to curb its excesses. What these three mothers face is a climactic realisation that their society does not value their milk in the way they do. In the case of Rosie and Ma, whose narratives are placed within contemporary societies, they are pushed by others who argue their sons must move beyond the bodies of their mothers and seek a physical and emotional independence. Armande is hunted down and imprisoned when she refuses to use her breastmilk to heal a tyrannical King's son.

Despite the residual images in these novels of the mother as healer and provider of spiritual sustenance, these narratives also call into question maternal agency where the mother experiences little support for her beliefs and is ostracised by others. She struggles against domination by others, particularly men, and much focus is placed on the physical intensity of her relationship with her children. There is a pervading sense of threat in these three novels, that outsiders, in particular men, may at any time threaten or physically hurt these women and their children. Rosie, Ma and Armande do seek to act as independent agents and look for the best interests of their child in societies that move to change their behaviour.

Armande is killed by a society on the brink of revolution, while Ma and Rosie work to integrate themselves back into societies that have deemed their breastfeeding practice unreasonable.

Milk Fever Lissa M. Cowan (2013)

Of the novels selected for analysis in this chapter on breastfeeding in fiction, Cowan's novel *Milk Fever* utilises the genre of historical fiction which provides the most obvious resonances with The Madonna of the Milk. Armande is an educated and refined woman who chose to humble herself to become a wet nurse. She has an abundance of milk, enough to feed many infants (11) and her milk is of such miraculous quality that babies are seemingly brought back from the brink of death (13). The novel explores ideas about femininity, motherhood and education in France on the cusp of revolution. Cowan's focus is on rural mothers and the small steps they make towards rebellion and change. Armande uses her good standing as a wet nurse among her local village women to influence them to better educate themselves, leading many of the female characters to see her as a Marian-like figure whose milk is benefiting the whole community.

Set in rural France in the late 1780s among the new intellectual milieu of the Enlightenment, *Milk Fever* is narrated by Celeste, a teenage peasant girl who finds work as a live-in servant with Armande Vivant and her father. Prior to Armande's current role as wet nurse, she had a young daughter who was fatally wounded in an accident. To help her grieve, the young mother nursed the babies of poor neighbourhood women whose children were not thriving. Word quickly spread outside the village of La Salle-les-Alpes of the educated woman whose intellect and refined ways "impress" (69) upon her milk and makes the babies who suckle from her unusually bright and healthy. After ignoring an order from the King to appear in court to nurse his sickly son, Armande is kidnapped. *Milk Fever* deals with themes

that appear in other examples of contemporary fiction analysed in this chapter about mothers and breastfeeding. Common themes are male domination, containment and violence.

Armande is framed from the viewpoint of Celeste, who admires Armande to the point of infatuation. Celeste also finds Armande's journal which provides a first-person perspective. Armande becomes a mother figure to the young Celeste. In Celeste's eyes her mistress has compassion for all people and has saved many babies from starvation through her milk. She does not doubt that Armande's milk lives up to its reputation, claiming that she has seen remarkable changes in infants such as this example early in the novel: "Slowly the baby came to life as he fed on her precious milk." (13) Armande has not only saved multiple infants, but has saved the ever-thankful Celeste from a life of poverty and abuse. The way in which Armande encourages other women to learn to read makes her dangerous to the King but a saint-like figure to the peasant women in the way she teaches them and looks after their children. One woman claims that "other villagers have spoken to me about your milk Madame Vivant. They say you have pots full with mother's milk hanging on hooks for babies to drink" (11). While this is an exaggeration by the villagers, Armande's milk supply is indeed plentiful enough for all the babies who are brought to her. There is much in the character of Armande as depicted through the eager eyes of Celeste that can be compared to images of the Madonna of the Milk, the spiritual mother with milk for all.

This religious connection is mentioned directly when Armande visits Paris and is encouraged to take up wet nursing. She is likened to Christ by the director of the official Parisian office for wet nurses when he tells her:

> I heard some gossip about a wet nurse who had more milk than any woman should. I was told this woman had no child of her own and that her milk was as plentiful as the Lord's loaves and fishes. (154)

Ironically, the male official likens her to Christ and not Christ's Mother, interpreting her milk as miraculous and an anomaly rather than salvific. She transgresses the boundaries of what any "woman should" have (154). Celeste fuses this Messianic imagery with an acknowledgement of the importance of Armande's position as mother:

> Her motherly liquid would not only make the future king healthy again, but benevolent also. He would see the excesses of those rulers before him and right past wrongs carried out in Almighty God's name. There would be bread for everybody. Bread. Labour. Education. (194)

Celeste holds a passionate belief that Armande's milk is a revolutionary force, potent enough to transform not only the health of the Dauphin but his attitude as well.

The novel's early section expands upon ideas about breastfeeding being more than simply nutrition. It critiques attitudes of the time through Armande, who disagrees with the "impatient women" (12) whose babies she nurses. She teaches them to tune into their baby, to try to learn their cues and remain attentive. She tells them, "mothering teaches patience and listening. You must learn to listen to your infant", to which one mother replies, "These are babies we are talking about. All they do is cry and fuss and soil their cots. Please tell me if I'm mistaken in this. What is there to listen to?" (13) Mothers come to her door regularly to complain of not enough milk, to which Armande continues to show them correct breastfeeding technique and encourage them to continue to suckle their babies to build their milk supply. The mothers in the novel are shown to be reluctant at times to take on her unorthodox advice, exhausted from the constant stress of too many mouths to feed. Armande's advice about infant feeding and care is very similar to advice given by experts in the twenty-first century, and perhaps Cowan is deliberately drawing on this similarity in order to comment on the timelessness of the mother/child breastfeeding relationship and the need for the mother to be attuned to her infant in order for the relationship to work.

In contrast, the prevailing attitude among the wealthy in eighteenth-century France was to obtain the services of a wet nurse. In his 1762 text *Emile or Treatise on Education* Jean-Jacques Rousseau urged women to breastfeed their own children in direct contradiction to the current practice of the time which was for wealthy urban women to have their infants fed by wet nurses. Although he believed that:

> The earliest education is most important and it undoubtedly is woman's work. If the author of nature had meant to assign it to men he would have given them milk to feed the child. (Rousseau, Book 1)

It is also specifically a task for the birth mother and not a wet nurse, to which he asks, "what is the origin of this senseless and unnatural custom?" (Rousseau, Book 1). In contrast to Rousseau's ideas, one mother in the novel exclaims to Armande, "I had a wet nurse for my son. Why, it was intolerable to me to be tied down to a screaming, groping infant and unable to circulate more freely in society" (153-54). Armande uses her "education and breeding" (153) to encourage the mothers she encounters to enjoy their infants by developing a caring and reciprocal relationship with them. What these mothers do firmly believe in is "when a child sucks at a woman's teats, the thoughts of that woman are impressed upon it" (6). In drawing attention to this archaic belief about wet nursing, the novel draws connections between nursing and relationships. Not only does Armande nurse babies but she interacts with them and often takes them into her home for the nursing period, treating them as her own children. She encourages their development and learning, and models attentive and careful mothering for the village mothers.

Armande is a key fictional example of what E. Ann Kaplan refers to as "Rousseau's contribution to the new motherhood-discourse . . . a regime of total—attention to the child at an early age" (Kaplan 20). *Milk Fever*'s protagonist shows a new dedication to motherhood that is symbolised through the potent qualities of her milk. Even though she works as a

volunteer wet nurse, Armande is in fact the direct opposite of how Rousseau viewed French wet nurses, who, in his estimation, were neglectful and only performing a role for payment. He instead exhorted women to feed their own children for the benefit of their family and of their country:

> When mothers deign to nurse their own children, then will be a reform in morals; natural feeling will revive in every heart; there will be no lack of citizens for the state . . . mother and father rely more on each other and grow dearer to one another; the marriage tie is strengthened. In the cheerful home life the mother finds her sweetest duties and the father his pleasantest recreation. Thus the cure of this one evil would work a wide-spread reformation; nature would regain her rights. When women become good mothers, men will be good husbands and fathers.
>
> (Rousseau, Book 1)

Ironically, Armande refuses to do her civic duty by nursing the King's sickly son. Her milk is only to be used at her discretion, and not by force. Armande encourages an empowered attitude among her young assistant Celeste, whose understanding of the world has changed since Armande taught her to read and write:

> I learned first-hand about the miraculous effects of Armande's milk on babies. Before, I was a mere servant watching from afar as the wet nurse suckled. Then I was part of her life, holding and changing babies, burping them, and rocking them to sleep...we were entering a new age driven by light. And I, a peasant girl whose father and mother never held a book, would be there to witness the change. (7-8)

This "new age" which Celeste refers to goes beyond a new understanding of childhood ushered in by Rousseau's *Emile* to a growing agitation among the poor about taxes, literacy and freedom of speech. Cowan tells the story of a nation on the cusp of a revolution through the domestic sphere and via the stories of mothers caught up in this time of change.

Armande's milk can also be read as miraculous not for any magical qualities, but for the way it which her attitude towards breastfeeding and towards children is changing those around her. Her milk has value not only for the babies who receive it, but for the women who learn from Armande to have confidence in their breastfeeding practice and in their ability to have a deep and fulfilling relationship with their children despite their desperate poverty.

Armande writes in her diary of a change in her life and a new sense of purpose several months after the death of her daughter:

> I sensed my wet nursing days ending as a desire rose within me to devote my time to teaching women the basics of reading and writing, and to compile the nursing notes in this diary into a much-needed book for new mothers. Perhaps those who read it might begin to trust more in their own instincts and less in what so-called reasoners said and thought on the subject. (161)

Breastfeeding represents agency for Armande, a gift she freely gives to other women's children in the hope of bettering the village she lives in. The term agency is taken from Andrea O'Reilly's work in *Twenty-First Century Motherhood* (3) where agency is described as mothering that is empowered, provides hope and works towards societal change. For Armande, her breastmilk is something that belongs to her that she can gift to others. Wet nursing gives her a strong sense of value, responsibility and hope. It helps her to connect with women of different social classes, which her father does not approve of, as evidenced in his frustration with Armande's insistence on wet nursing:

> "Why is wet nursing your duty?" His tone was anxious. "I did not spend all that time with you in the library reading for you to care for other people's children." It was the first time I heard him raise his voice to her in anger. "You have never understood father," Armande said to him. "Women seek my counsel and are lost without it. This is where we differ". (21)

Monsieur Vivant is repeating an opinion Armande has heard from him before. Years earlier, he wrote her a letter stating, "it saddens me to hear that a woman of your station should resort to such dreary ways of making a living" (153). Her opinions differ from all the men in the novel who do not show any approval for her care of women and children. Yet women believe in the magical quality of her milk although Armande herself never makes that claim. Upon learning that the King has requested the presence of Armande, her mentor Margot claims:

> If she has been taken against her will to Versailles, then she is in great danger of losing the magic and wisdom of her milk . . . wisdom in the wrong hands can drain magic from those who possess it. (95-6)

Armande's character is imbued with witch-like healing properties that grow in hyperbole as her reputation grows. While not a midwife, Armande's service to women is seen as having similar qualities to Cosslett's "crone" (38) figure of the medieval midwife. However, the King does not see any value in her connection with other women or any wisdom in her practices. He sees her breastmilk as a magical anomaly which might cure his son, much like the director of Paris' wet nurses.

When infants whom Armande had nursed appear to Celeste and sing revolutionary songs or fragments of political verse, Celeste takes these apparitions as magical signs of how valuable the wet nurse's breastmilk is. It also dawns on Celeste just how dangerous Armande might become to the ruling elite as an agitator of the poor. Upon finding Armande held in a Parisian prison, Celeste is told the kidnapping led to Armande's loss of milk. Now completely obsessed with the idea that Armande will save France through her milk, Celeste abducts an infant from an orphanage to bring to the prison in the hope suckling this child will bring Armande's "precious milk" (233) back. It is now Celeste's firm belief "for the revolt to be a success, these babies had to keep drinking her wondrous milk" (230). However,

Armande's milk has indeed dried up. This communal mother with milk for so many has been contained by political forces and threatened into submission.

When Armande is caught in a crowd of rioters and burned to death, Celeste is left broken, but is reassured by other women that, "She'll be with us all the same. The alarm bell of reason is making itself heard throughout the land. Women are waking up" (244). Celeste remains uncertain. She has seen the corruption of the police and the violent ignorance of people who insist they are right. Celeste does not believe the riots will solve any problems for the poor and oppressed, as "their rage had stamped out Armande's precious life and the motherly liquid that would have done them so much good. How could there be liberty without womanly wisdom?" (256). Celeste's view of the coming French Revolution centres on divine salvation, which she equates with women who are blest by God such as Armande. In her understanding, men use force and threat to create change while women show real bravery and insight. Celeste's decision to go back to the mountain village and extend her literacy skills while helping other women to do so demonstrates a belief in a quieter revolution that would involve women helping one another to broaden their minds and take a more active role in their own life. Celeste is an agent for change in a way that is rural, community-based and works to empower women and their children. In this method she has found a way to work against the threat of violence, although she must remain in remote areas to be safe.

Milk Fever highlights the way threat works against women who speak out. They are eliminated or forced to live quietly for fear of drawing attention to their actions, yet they are still working for change in their own way. Breastmilk in this novel acts as a powerful symbol of empowerment and change for those who would believe in its value.

Room Emma Donoghue (2010)

The qualities of comfort, nourishment and sacrifice present in discussions of the Madonna of the Milk have echoes in *Room* in the way Ma operates as the sole nourisher of the whole world of Room (401) and all its inhabitants, who is her only son Jack. This intense, tactile understanding of the world is explored in this analysis of the novel, as well as how the theme of salvation draws attention to my explorations of the use of Marian representations of breastfeeding and motherhood.

Room's opening chapters focus on five-year-old Jack's growing understanding of the captive state he is held in with his "Ma" (3), and the constant threat of "Old Nick" (6) who keeps them locked in his reinforced garden shed. Ma's mothering decisions are made in light of her need to seek a literal and figurative freedom from her dual captivity as imprisoned sex slave and as intensive mother. Her decision to allow Jack, who was born and raised in this captive state, to continue to breastfeed is the key example of her "maternal thinking" (Ruddick 13) while trapped inside Room. This also proves to be one of the most controversial mothering decisions she is called to defend once she has been freed.

The reaction of secondary characters depicts extended breastfeeding as an excessive maternal attachment that impinges on Jack's ability to become independent. The desire shown by Jack in wanting to continue the breastfeeding relationship well into childhood is not seen by his mother as an unusual or excessive desire for the breast, but rather a need for comfort and security that she grants him in their captive state. Ma also benefits from the reciprocal nature of the breastfeeding relationship. Its routine in their days brings calm and quiet to a five-year-old with more energy than can be contained within Room. Other people do not understand Ma's reasoning for allowing Jack to continue to "have some" (23) past infancy, and this forms the greatest point of interest for others once Ma and Jack both been freed from Room. It is others looking in on this tactile relationship, which has stretched well

beyond Jack's infant years, who believe the practice of extended breastfeeding to be detrimental to Jack's development. It is seen by the media and experts who hound Ma once she is freed from Room as an unnecessary maternal practice. Portrayed primarily through the questions Ma is asked in a televised interview, the interviewer functions as a metaphorical mirror for Ma's family, her society and the readers of Donoghue's novel who in online reviews have commented on their surprise and disgust at the use of breastfeeding in the narrative (Sheila). What Ma's society fails to realise is that extended breastfeeding whilst in captivity was a productive activity that allowed both her and her son to survive physically and emotionally. Donoghue's emphasis on media reactions to Ma's story show her awareness of public displays of breastfeeding as a potentially polarising issue for her readers, voicing the irony of the situation through Ma's outburst to her interviewer: "in this whole story, *that's* the shocking detail?" (292).

Maternal decision making in *Room* works as a series of constant negotiations for Ma. Both her son and her captor hold demands over her physical body, although Old Nick offers her no choice as to how he uses her. Jack's physical demands for breastfeeding, on the other hand, are seen by Ma as those of a child who knows no other world beyond the cell that holds them both captive. Jack's demands and needs from his mother are for comfort and security, and not power. Alison Bartlett's 2005 article "Maternal Sexuality and Breastfeeding" refers to the enjoyment of the tactile nature of breastfeeding:

> as an embodied experience which involves intense physical exchanges: skin touching, hands holding, holding and playing, bodies sharing, hormones pulsing, as well as the emotional relation of intimacy, care and often passionate engagement. (68)

Taking Bartlett's description, it can be seen how this potential sensuality of the practice might be of great comfort to Ma, who must endure Old Nick's visits to Room most nights for sex. To refuse would mean to risk torture and death, as well as the safety of her son. Ma

complies with the nightly ritual, although once freed and able to tell her story she relates how at the beginning of her captivity she attempted to resist: “I kicked and screamed. One time I hit him over the head with the lid of the toilet. I didn’t wash, for a long time I wouldn’t speak.” (290) This led to physical attacks that stopped once she complied with his demands. Bartlett explores breastfeeding as a complex working of embodied motherhood and as a multi-layered physical and emotional experience. It is capable of transcending the meaning of motherhood beyond love, care and nurture of one’s child towards a more reciprocal understanding of the giving and receiving of love and attachment. In Ma’s case, this reciprocal sensuality is both life-giving and lifesaving for her in this captive state.

Breastfeeding, and the closeness it brings to Jack, offers the possibility of life beyond Room. But Ma soon realises that Jack is outgrowing their confined space and will come upon the truth of their existence eventually. As she has not been able to escape previously, Ma comes to believe that the only way she can be freed from Room and save her son from this captivity is to use him as the means of escape. When Ma comes up with her plan, she uses breastfeeding as a deliberate strategy. When Jack asks her:

“Can I have some?”

“Sure,” she says, “come here”.

I sit in her lap and lift up her T-shirt and I have lots for a long time.

“All done?” she says in my ear.

“Yeah.”

“Listen, Jack. Are you listening?”

“I’m always listening.”

“We have to get out of here.” (130)

Once Ma is sure she has his attention and cooperation she slowly reveals the reality of their situation during these nursing periods, using her breastfeeding to comfort him and give

him confidence so that he can agree to her escape plan. There are echoes of the life of the Madonna of the Milk in the dependence between Ma and Jack. The mother cannot attain salvation without the son who gives "life to the world" (GNB, John 6.33). At the beginning of this novel, Jack is the whole world for his mother as she is for him. Their world as a mother-child dyad does not yet extend beyond the confines of Room. Jack's birth was an experience of salvation from the hell of captivity for his mother**.** In her television interview she tells of the devastation of her first stillborn daughter and that after the safe birth of Jack, "I was alive again, I mattered" (291). The birth of her son and her ability to nourish him with her body gave Ma a new sense of purpose, but Ma comes to the realisation that Jack's rapidly growing mind and body mean they must move beyond this life in order to remain "alive" (291).

I do not argue in my analysis of these novels that it is the intention of the authors in any way, but there are similarities between the residual image of the Madonna of the Milk and Ma's role in this particular novel as the physical and emotional nourisher of the whole world of Room. While there are similarities between her and the Marian image of salvation through breastmilk, Jack's great escape plays on the resurrection narrative of Christ.

Ma experiences salvation through her son twice in the time they are held captive. In the first instance, Ma is saved from despair by Jack's seemingly miraculous unassisted birth in Room after the trauma of the first stillborn child (291). She is saved a second time when she leads Old Nick to believe that Jack has died of illness. The son is entombed by Ma when she wraps him in the rug (167). His successful performance at death allows him to "come out of the tomb" (GNB, John 20.2) once "Outside" (173-174). Alerting authorities to the property, it is through her son that Ma experiences this second salvation—her own rebirth into the free world.

But this salvation comes at a cost. Although she is told "Nobody's expressing any judgement about your choices or strategies" (243), every decision Ma made inside Room leads her to feel second-guessed and psychologically analysed by her parents, experts, the media and other parents Outside (173). Ma and Jack's pre-escape relationship—that physical interdependence of the child at the breast of the mother, their arms around each other—is viewed as archaic, excessive and in need of immediate change. The mother is no longer welcome to nourish her child, and she is quickly encouraged in various ways to wean Jack. For Jack, the physical bond that he has with his mother through breastfeeding acts as a safe place to return to that allows him to take risks to explore and question his tiny world prior to his escape. He orbits around his mother's body, coming back for comfort before setting off again. In his own words, "When I was three I still had lots anytime, but since I was four I'm so busy doing stuff I only have some a few times in the day and the night" (23). Ma's acceptance that Jack wants to breastfeed beyond his infancy allows him some choice in what is a powerless life dictated by Old Nick. It also helps him to stay calm and happy within Room. Within the first sixty pages of the novel, having "some" (23) is referred to ten times within the context of his routine of morning feed, before nap feed, before bedtime feed. It offers him great comfort and is one of the first things he wishes for when Old Nick makes his nightly visits and Jack is confined to the wardrobe. "In Wardrobe I always try to squeeze my eyes tight and switch off fast so I don't hear Old Nick come, then I'll wake up and it'll be morning and I'll be in Bed with Ma having some and everything OK" (33).

It is Donoghue's use of the phrase "having some" (23) to refer to a breastfeed that points the reader to the discomfort that Ma's television interviewer feels. This discomfort is echoed in some of Donoghue's readership expressed in online blogs (Sheila), as well as Ann Marie A. Short's analysis of reader opinions of this novel (155). It is also perhaps the discomfort that the general reader of this novel might feel. This word "some" has erotic

shades. Short found that reader opinions posted online understood that there was a "suggestion of sexual deviance, it meant to arouse suspicion surrounding the mutual intentions and benefits surrounding the mother-son breastfeeding relationship depicted in the novel" (Short 155). It is not purely milk, but *some* other experience, perhaps something of a sexual nature, but perhaps *some*thing else that cannot be put into words and understood by those outside of this mutually beneficial breastfeeding dyad.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, literary examples of breastfeeding are a rarity, and even more so examples of extended breastfeeding, defined by the international La Leche League as past the first twelve months of life (Burbidge), but when these examples occur, they are often a focal point for discussion on the text and its critical review. An example of the reaction to the use of breastfeeding in *Room* is taken from American online book reviewer Sheila, who pointed to the use of breastfeeding in the novel in her 2010 blog post:

> The only thing that really bothered me throughout the entire read was the breastfeeding. I hate to say that and I feel just prudish doing so . . . but it really disturbed me. And maybe that is what author Emma Donoghue was going for . . . the squirm factor. I think the fact that Jack was 5 and asking for "some" or walking up to his mom and lifting her shirt up to breast feed just still even as I type bugs me. And again—I get it. I am sure the milk that Jack needed was probably not readily available in their circumstances and they never knew if they could count on Old Nick or not, so I understand why it is in the book . . . I guess I am just wondering if anyone else squirmed through this too? (Sheila; ellipses in original)

Replies to Shelia's question included the words "horrified", "not normal", "disturbed" and "bothered", although all the replies went on to say how they felt it was justified under the

circumstances of the novel. When Sheila asks the author, Donoghue's reply is posted on Sheila's blog as:

> . . . your breastfeeding question. It seems to me that Jack mentions it pretty rarely, actually: he gives far more analysis of what they have for lunch and dinner. But it's such a touchy subject (especially, I'm finding, in the US) that it stands out. I kept it in because it seemed entirely natural that Ma would keep up that most comforting part of the mother-baby bond as long as they are living very much like a mother-and-baby (never apart, never socializing with other people) in *ROOM*. (Sheila)

Breastfeeding disrupts the meaning of the breast as sexual object. It instead becomes a focal point for an intense, tactile mother-child relationship to the exclusion of all others (Bartlett, *Breastwork* 85). When this intensity continues beyond infancy, debates about the separation and independence of mother and child are often the focus (165). I consider Ma's extended breastfeeding here in the light of Sara Ruddick's theories of maternal thinking to argue that, for Ma, this was the only reasonable choice. Ma's extended breastfeeding and her decision-making as a mother in the light maternal thinking are used to argue that for Ma her choices were life-saving and life-giving in the face of captivity and violence. In the 1989 text *Maternal Thinking*, Ruddick sets out what constitutes maternal work in three main areas—preservation, growth and social acceptance. The third practice involves the mother training the child to be socially acceptable. This training can include self-questioning and reflective thinking on the part of the mother. It requires mothers to balance their power to dominate with their power to teach, guide and instruct a developing person who has their own growing ideas about the world. The reflection by mothers on their practice is termed "maternal thinking" (127). The purpose of this thinking is to analyse the practice against the overall goals of preservation, growth and training to see what strategies are needed, or need to be changed, to be able to make judgements about success or weaknesses.

Ma's extended breastfeeding of Jack meets his immediate needs for preservation and growth within the confines of Room. Breastmilk offers a nutritional top-up for Jack as the rations Old Nick brings are sparse. Ma ensures that she and Jack exercise daily in their tiny space with a variety of games, and she enforces as much hygiene as possible with regular cleaning, and a routine of bathing, laundry and tooth brushing. She has taught him to read and write and uses every opportunity to engage him in play and learning as far as her physical and mental health will allow, but in Room there is no need for her to teach social acceptance explicitly. Jack is currently functioning as independently as he can within his confined world, and breastfeeding has not stopped his physical and intellectual maturation.

What is clear is that Ma is doing all she can to ensure both she and Jack maintain some kind of normal life within this enslaved existence. She deliberately does not tell him about the world Outside as she does not want him to feel the hopeless sense of entrapment that she feels. Ma's maternal thinking, which encompasses her reflection on maternal practices and her constant reassessment and adjustment of these strategies, has allowed Jack to grow into as much a normal boy as can be under the circumstances. This is despite Ma not being able to reflect on her mothering with anyone else. In the world that is Room, it is by no means an excessive attachment between mother and child, but a tactile relationship that is negotiated by both parties.

Once they are Outside, Ma's breastfeeding practice becomes a point of conflict between herself and her own mother, and other members of Ma's family, who deem her physical attachment to her son through the breastfeeding relationship as excessive and damaging to Jack's maturity (173). The five years that Ma has spent raising Jack is almost undone, as she must begin a new process of social training for Jack to be able to fit into this new reality. In the only televised media interview she gives, Ma's maternal thinking inside Room (401) is challenged at every point. She is asked to justify not only the breastfeeding,

but why she never thought of asking Old Nick to abandon baby Jack at a hospital so that a "loving family" could raise him and he could have a "normal happy childhood" (297). She is also asked if she felt "bad about deceiving" (293) Jack about the reality of life in the real world. Her answer to all this is, "I think what babies want is mostly to have their mothers right there" (292). But she is left with a shocking realisation that the world does not truly understand or empathise with her maternal thinking. Her understanding and experience of a reciprocal, tactile relationship is seen by the world as suffocating, mother-focused and having to do with placing her own needs ahead of her child by allowing Jack to remain in captivity with her.

This focus on getting Jack to learn quickly to separate from his mother distresses them both, and the day after the television interview Ma deliberately overdoses on prescription pills. The interviewer's insinuation that her maternal thinking was deeply flawed has undermined Ma's understanding of herself as a good mother. No-one seems to understand the joy that mothering brought her, nor how Jack's birth in Room made her ordeal bearable. In the world Outside she is torn between her old teenage self and her current mother self, and for a time she cannot work out how to resolve the two parts of her life. As she is grappling with how to come together, Jack is trying to deal with their separation. In Jack's understanding, he is an extension of Ma, much like a newborn who cannot differentiate between himself and others. Breastfeeding inside that Room highlights the mother-child relationship on multiple levels. Room operates as a womb, and Jack's escape is his birth into reality. Jack and Ma remain connected through the nursing relationship and within the confines of Room like a newborn child and its mother. Ma's body is Jack's physical and emotional origin, and while it is only the two of them, he cannot develop a fully separate sense of self. Jack's understanding of his infant world began at his mother's breast, therefore he deliberately seeks out his mother's breast in his rebirth into the world Outside. For it is at her breast that he can

experience a comfort, and a stillness, that allows him to process all the new information he is gaining about the real world, to make those social connections and understandings of how the world operates. In her exploration of the key concepts of philosopher Gilles Deleuze, Claire Colebrook uses the specific example of breastfeeding to illustrate social connections between people, and how connections create experiences that shape a subjective reality:

> Before there is a child who relates to a 'mother'—before there are these social selves—there is a pre-personal perception, the connection of mouth and breast . . . The child's mouth . . . that has experienced pleasure at the breast comes to desire or anticipate the breast. The breast becomes more than it actually is (a body part) and takes on an added virtual dimension—the breast of fantasy, pleasure and desire. (Colebrook 82)

The breast takes on many meanings for the infant, and the relationship between the infant's body and his mother's forms the basis for all other experiences. For Jack, the understanding of the world he knows at his mother's breast is widening and brings with it a mixture of fear, exhilaration and joy. He discovers grass, the sky, the joy of climbing the stairs and of eating new foods. Jack is slowly growing an appetite for the new experiences of this world. As Coleman asserts, "We only have the idea of 'human' or the 'subject' *after* bodies connect to form regular sequences and *then* reflect and expand these sequences into some general notion of 'subjectivity'." (Colebrook 82) Ma is on another path—seeking her lost subjectivity as woman and trying to find a place in this new world where she can be both woman and mother. For Ma, this means an end to the nursing relationship as she seeks, in Ruddick's term, to train Jack to be socially accepted by this wider world and to move him towards independence so that she too may fully participate in her new life.

After some months Outside, Ma decides that Jack will no longer breastfeed (378) but she allows him to share her bed indefinitely. It is a compromise that Jack reluctantly agrees to

as he continues to learn that the world Outside means that he and his mother will eventually become separate persons yet somehow still share a life together. Her attempts to train Jack to be a fully functioning and separate individual in the world falter when her confidence is shaken by others, who assume her maternal thinking to be flawed and not about the most loving way to help her child and herself survive their captivity. These parents from the Outside equate love with social training, not attachment or salvation in any form, so both Jack and Ma provide a challenging perspective about the complexities of reciprocal love in human relationships. In the end, Ma and Jack's salvation has been from captivity to a new kind of world in which Marian images of the mother as the physical and spiritual source of nourishment is displaced to accommodate the more important end point of mothering practice: social training and acceptability. O'Reilly argues that by the end of the novel, the main tasks of mothering—preservation, nurturance and training—have been "fully enacted and accomplished by Ma" (O'Reilly, "All Those Years" 91) However, in order for Ma to complete this next phase of her maternal practice, the social training in the context of Jack's new life, the physical and emotional attachment of the breastfeeding relationship must come to an end. Breastfeeding and social training are rendered incompatible in *Room* and Ma must lose her milk in order to accomplish what her society deems to be the final and most important task of mothering: the separation of mother and child.

The Slap Christos Tsiolkas (2008)

As was mentioned in the previous section on *Room*, the occurrence of extended breastfeeding in fiction is not common. In both *Room* and *The Slap*, not only does breastfeeding become a focal point of the narratives but both novels depict the backlash against a mother who chooses to continue to breastfeed an older child. Not only are Ma and Rosie's children both

on the cusp of schooling and entering into formal social "training", in the words of Sara Ruddick (21), but they are both boys. This raises questions about how breastfeeding in literature foregrounds concerns about the development of masculinity and the relationship between the sexual and the maternal breast. Analysis of Tsiolkas' novel draws on my previous discussions of Marian images of salvation and nourishment in *Room* to discuss how Rosie is constructed as breastfeeding mother through the use of framing techniques within the narrative. These frames serve to highlight the concerns other characters have about how Rosie and mothers like her might be raising the next generation of Australian men.

The Slap is read here as a useful critique about fatherhood, motherhood and attachment in contemporary Australian society. The setting of Tsiolkas' fifth novel is upper-middle-class suburban Melbourne. Tsiolkas himself has referred to his characters in *The Slap* as having an enormous sense of "entitlement" and "greed" (Christos) that comes with being a successful first-generation-born Australian of immigrant parents for whom education and social mobility were out of reach. Power has shifted to the younger generations of urbanised Australians: richer, upwardly mobile, better educated and better resourced than their parents. *The Slap* explores the interplay between family relationships and friendships. What is at stake in the novel is the mothering of a young son, and the implications of Rosie's mothering practice on the way her son will gain his sense of self in a society that is questioning the way he has been raised. The novel focuses on the inner workings of neo-liberal parenting relationships and the social cost of raising children. Parenting and the judgement of parents, specifically mothers, has been a particular discourse in relation to critical review and mass media review of *The Slap* (McIntosh; Stephens). Four-year-old Hugo, who is at the receiving end of the infamous "slap" of the title, is taught by his mother Rosie that no one is allowed to touch his body without his permission. What surprises her is the way in which the focus of attention comes back not to the slapping of Hugo, but the tactile nature of the breastfeeding

relationship he has with his mother, which is an affirming practice for both mother and child that others cannot see.

The character of Rosie, both in the novel and in the ABC television adaptation, has attracted much attention for her philosophy of mothering and her commitment to extended breastfeeding. According to Julie Stephens, the character of Rosie was seen by television audiences:

> as somehow more unsettling than the violent, abusive Harry, or the other characters, who unlike Rosie, all were involved in acts of deception toward those closest to them . . . The mistakes, contradictions and frailties of other characters were forgiven, while Rosie's were not. ("Passionate Mothering" 1)

Tsiolkas uses an omniscient third-person narrator to allocate two chapters each to eight characters who, in turn, articulate their views on the morality of the slapping of Hugo, the mothering of Hugo and the role of mothers and fathers in society.

The representation of good mothering in the novel is framed by the point of view of Manolis, Hector's Greek-born father. Manolis is important in defining what both Hector and Harry, as second-generation and more privileged and socially mobile Greek Australians, believe good motherhood is. Manolis' chapters set up important paradigms of good motherhood, and noticeably do not discuss fatherhood apart from manhood. Life has brought him little joy and he directs his bitterness at mothers and their children, whom he believes grew up in Australia privileged but without understanding how this privilege was fought for by their parents: "Fuck them. We've looked after them, we've educated them, we've done everything for them . . . But for one night I want to act as if I never had children. For one night I want to forget them." (413) Manolis believes women are "blinded" (385) to the reality of who their children are as adults, what they might be capable of that would be in conflict with their upbringing. In his mind, women are skewed towards a narrow reality. Fathers, in

his view, should be different, but there is a fatherhood and a manhood that he believes not all men are capable of:

> He was not blinded to who and what his children were. Of course, there were men who thought as women did, men whose children made them insensible to the worth of others. But they were weak men, not men who belonged in the world . . . Women were mothers, and as mothers they were selfish, uninterested and unmoved by the world. (385)

According to Manolis, as well as his nephew Harry and his son Hector who seemingly inherited Manolis' worldview, private motherhood and public life are separate, gendered spheres. Fathers can clearly be of this world, while mothers, because of their attachment to their offspring, are incapable of having any real response to other happenings outside of their family. There are echoes of all the younger fathers in this statement—Hector, Harry and Garry who is so despised by the first two characters yet all experience that same exasperation with fatherhood and domestic conflict. The perceived failing of Rosie as a mother becomes a scapegoat for the men's individual bitterness about family and the constant negotiations between family responsibility and the individual life. Breastfeeding, with its literal attachment of the infant to the mother's body, is the epitome of an individual and free life interrupted, and with each character except Rosie trying to find a temporary escape from parenting, her deliberate and fierce bodily attachment to her son is indeed "unsettling" (Stephens, "Passionate Mothering" 1) and abject to all who witnessed the slap.

Contrasting with *Room* and *Beloved,* where breastfeeding is seen from the point of view of the mother and other people's reactions occur later in the narrative, *The Slap* frames breastfeeding from the male point of view, stating the firm opinions of all the other characters before revealing the thoughts of the breastfeeding mother herself. *The Slap* is cinematic in style, with its episodic moves from character to character. The novel was rewritten as a

television mini-series that aired on the ABC in 2011 and adapted for US audiences and aired in 2015. This episodic style focuses on point of view and the way in which characters appear outwardly to their friends and family while hiding a private life. The structure helps the narrative to articulate distinctions between each character's moral viewpoint and their points of conflict with one another, in particular between genders, ethnicities and generations. Deception operates as a key theme, each character hiding addictions, fantasies or indiscretions from their families.

Set as a point of contrast with these eight main characters is the secondary character, Bilal. A former alcoholic who converts to Islam, the previously rebellious and addicted old school friend of Harry and Hector has changed his life completely. He becomes a moral compass for the other male characters his age, attracting their admiration by his refusal to go back to his old lifestyle and his unswerving commitment to his wife and children. Constantine Verevis writes that Rosie at first glance seems to typify white Australian motherhood, until the reality of her suffering at the hands of an alcoholic husband and her delinquent past, along with the insistence on her unique way of mothering Hugo, changes the reader's understanding of what she might represent (774-75). Bilal tells her firmly that she must stay away from his family and that she is to have no more to do with his wife. Rosie is aghast that her only source of support in the duration of pressing charges against Harry is being taken from her, but Bilal is insistent: "You remind me of a life I don't ever want to go back to . . . I don't think you're any good, Rosie . . . I just want you to promise me that, that you'll leave my family alone." (Tsiolkas 288) She is marginalised and considered highly questionable by Hector, Harry and now Bilal, whose firm opinions about her clearly shape the way she is portrayed both to other characters and to the reader.

The concept of "the male gaze" (837), first described by Laura Mulvey for the feminist critique of cinema, provides a useful framework for the analysis of the character of

Rosie and how Rosie as a woman and as a mother is framed. Mulvey describes cinema as a pleasure that is produced from the male point of view, both as audience and as producer of the action: "The determining male gaze," Mulvey writes, "projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed" (837). Tsiolkas' framing of Rosie by the initial reactions of Hector and Harry creates a similar lens through which to both view and understand Rosie as representative of a particular type of mother. Rosie is described at first in relation to Hector, a Greek-Australian, married, father-of-two and the host of the barbeque where the slapping incident occurs. Hector's point of view introduces the readers to the guests arriving at the home he shares with his wife Aisha. Hector immediately distances himself from Rosie—she is his wife's friend, not his, and despite Rosie's alcoholic husband and all the trouble Gary's drinking gave them each time the friends got together, Aisha had "loyalty" (24) towards her friend. Rosie is then positioned as the mother of four-year-old Hugo. The boy is described as a "cherubic" (23) looking child, but he is known for his temper and the lack of discipline shown by his parents. Despite this belief in Rosie and Gary's inability to parent well, Hector also clearly acknowledges Hugo's vulnerability as a child, recalling when he once baby-sat Hugo with Aisha and the boy refused to go to sleep. Wanting to impose the same discipline on him as they always do on their own children, Hector "screamed an order so loud and so close to the little boy's ear that the child recoiled and started a long, disbelieving sob. Realising he had terrified the boy, Hector had scooped him into his arms and rocked him to sleep" (24). It is in his relations with others that we see Hector as a man torn between conformity and violence, between needing to overtly discipline and easily losing control over other aspects of his life. Hugo's seemingly wild behaviour is confronting to Hector, who believes in stern parenting and an ordered home, yet when Hugo lashes out we see a reflection of Hector's own need to break rules and be impulsive. The

insistence by Hugo's parents that their child be given few boundaries is met with rage and disgust by Hector, who has no respect for Rosie's attitudes towards mothering or Gary's inability to deal with alcohol. The rage is directed at the lack of discipline shown by the parents that allows Hugo to act out his impulses.

Rosie and Gary are clearly portrayed as the abject couple among the group of guests at Hector's house. There is a clear divide between Gary and Rosie and the other parents present. When Gary is alerted by another guest that Hugo is having a tantrum, he answers:

> 'Let Rosie deal with it. She's the one who spoils him, so let her fucking deal with it.' His voice softened; the sadness was unmistakable.
>
> 'You were right, 'Nouks, I shouldn't have had a child. I'm no good as a father.' (42)

Gary seeks escape from parenting by drinking; in fact, he goes right on drinking in the backyard while Rosie goes back inside to "deal" (42) with Hugo's second tantrum in a matter of minutes. Hector walks back inside to speak to his own children and notices "Rosie's face was tear-stained, as was her son's who was sucking hard at her nipple" (42). Hector's reaction to this perceived lax parenting is tempered by his belief that Hugo is the unfortunate offspring of people who don't know how to parent. He feels frustration but not genuine rage at the boy's uncontrollable behaviour. Rosie is singled out among the group of parents for her decision to continue breastfeeding Hugo. Her maternal practice is once again framed and othered in relation to the views of everyone else present at Hector's house. This is described by Hector and reiterated as abject by his Greek-born mother:

> Hector followed Aisha into the kitchen. Hugo was now quiet and suckling contentedly at Rosie's breast . . . His mother could not take her eyes off the suckling child. He knew she was disgusted that Rosie was still breastfeeding Hugo at his age. He agreed with her. (33)

Rosie's breastfeeding is inappropriate and offensive not only to Hector but to another mother, albeit a mother of adult children born to another culture. There is a clear definition made by Hector between the "mother" that his mother represents and what Rosie represents. *The Slap* underlays the complexities of twenty-first-century parenting with ethnic and class tensions, forming a representation of how mothers should be, as understood by men.

Rocco's point of view in his allocated chapter is a torrent of abuse at Rosie and Gary and indifference towards their child. Arriving at their house, he thinks, "the fucking pricks didn't even have enough pride to look after their home" (151). He notices that the garden is unmaintained, Rosie has not started dinner, and the house is untidy. Everything about this family offends and disgusts his sense of social mobility, and his pride in his attractive wife, beautiful house, flourishing business and polite children. When Harry comes upon Rosie in her house she is breastfeeding Hugo. Rocco's thoughts immediately jump to the sexual:

> There was something both obscene and—possibly because of that—erotic about seeing such a grown-up child still drinking from his mother. A quick thought came to Harry. What would she do once the brat started school? Would she be sticking her jugs through the school fence? (153)

This train of thought arouses Harry, who finds Rosie physically beautiful yet verbally abusive and possibly hiding something in her "serpent's eyes" (153). He is also repulsed by Gary's obvious disapproval of the breastfeeding, as Gary "obviously didn't have the fucking balls to do a thing about it" (154). Rosie refuses Harry's apology about slapping her son and insists that legal action will be taken against him. By the end of his visit to the house, Harry has referred to Rosie as "silly cow" (154), "lazy bitch" (155) a "witch" (157) and "degenerate trash" (158). Even Hector is taken aback by the vehemence with which Harry seems to despise Rosie and Garry. Harry seeks out his lover and drug dealer Kelly directly after going over to Rosie's house to apologise for slapping Hugo. Harry finds the combination of disgust

and fascination at her breastfeeding sexually excites him and he seeks the pleasure of another less repulsive woman. Rosie's husband Gary echoes this view of the erotic maternal in the following scene:

> She was feeding Hugo on the couch when Gary walked back into the room . . .
>
> He came and stood over them. He watched his son suck contentedly on Rosie's tit.
>
> 'I want some of that.'
>
> Rosie frowned. 'Don't, Gaz.'
>
> 'I do. I want some of your boobie.'
>
> Hugo dropped her nipple and looked mutinously at his father. 'No. It's mine.'
>
> 'No it isn't.'
>
> Hugo looked at her for encouragement. 'Whose boobies are they?'
>
> 'They belong to all of us,' she said, laughing. (265-66)

This scene occurs directly after Rosie refuses Gary's request for sex, claiming that their son was calling for her attention. Despite Rosie's half-hearted attempt to deflect Gary with humour, Gary "plonked himself next to her and lowered her blouse. He pinched at her nipple, hurting her, and sunk his lips over it" (266).

Throughout the novel it becomes increasingly clear that Gary is unhappy with Rosie and with being a father. He threatens her physically and verbally and drinks to excess. What Hector and Harry refuse to realise is that despite their belief that Gary is unlike them and beneath them in every way, he shares many similarities. Hector and Harry struggle with physical and sexual self-control. Harry is menacing towards his wife whose eagerness to placate him reminds him "of a faithful dumb animal" (150). Both he and Hector fantasise about killing and bashing their wives and other people who annoy them. They hide their cocaine and speed habits and serial infidelities from their families. Hector, Harry and Gary are all men caught in a love-hate relationship with their children, are unhappy in their

marriages and long for the freedom of a life without family responsibilities. It is their wives who keep the family life going, whose background domestic and childrearing labour keep the family structure intact. Rosie's breastfeeding seems to trigger something in these men, a sense of the suffocation of the maternal, of parental responsibilities, of the intense physicality of parenting, and perhaps of the difference between a maternal and paternal relationship with a child.

Both Hector and Harry allude to the quiet way in which their wives deal with things: sorting out conflict between their children, negotiating relationships with in-laws and extended family, friendships. Rosie is presented as a stark contrast. Her breastfeeding is proud and public; she is vocal and intense with her opinions of others. She does not quietly fade into the background when things go wrong as the other female characters do. Every adult character in the novel has a strong negative opinion about her. In the words of Isabel McIntosh's article, "We're all Rosie", this character is "without respect from all sides" (1) and Tsiolkas deliberately keeps her story untold until halfway through the narrative.

We first read Rosie's point of view more than two hundred pages into the novel, when she is allocated her own chapter. By the time this chapter is read, however, the reader's opinion of Rosie has already been coloured by the opinions and language of Hector, Harry, Anouk and Connie. Only teenage Connie is sympathetic to Rosie at this stage. Rosie's philosophy about mothering is at odds with that of her female friends. Anouk deliberately kept her pregnancy and termination secret from her lover so that he could not influence her decision. Aisha fantasises about leaving her husband and children and taking a lover, freeing herself of the responsibilities of motherhood. Motherhood was a turning point in Rosie's life, although it had a very dark beginning. She writes honestly in her chapter of the severe post-partum depression that lasted six months after the birth of Hugo, which she kept hidden from

everyone. Fantasising about killing her child and almost abandoning him in the house, Rosie reached a crisis point where she realised that she had to accept the reality of motherhood:

> You are not free, she'd told herself. If you want to survive this, if you don't want to kill yourself or kill your child, you must realise you are not free. From now on, until he can walk away from you, your life means nothing—his life is all that matters . . . He was the focus, he was the centre, he possessed her body. She lost herself in him. That's how she had set herself free. (281)

Breastfeeding as literal connection and interdependence with her son gives Rosie a strong sense of self-worth and purpose. There are similarities here to the Marian qualities of sacrifice and salvation that were noted in *Room*. It is in giving up everything else the world has to offer in order to mother her son that Rosie experiences a freedom and a salvation from her despair. By placing her son at the centre of her existence, as the Madonna of the Milk did, Rosie is able to see a larger purpose to her life. It is a very positive maternal practice for her, but in *The Slap* it operates as an example of intensive, all-consuming parenting among a group of parents who are torn between love for a family life and their need for a freedom they see as incompatible with the life they are currently living.

The coupling of the breastfeeding with a mother figure who deviates from the societal norm of 'good' motherhood, as expressed by men such as Hector and Harry, make Rosie's maternal practice open to intense scrutiny about her ability to mother and her moral character. She is constructed and set apart as an abject example of motherhood, made even more abhorrent by her lack of power in an abusive relationship with her husband. The male point of view in *The Slap* sees extended breastfeeding as creating a selfish, undisciplined child who is likely to grow up socially unacceptable. The father of the child is seen as unable to assert his masculinity on his wife by stopping her behaviour and placing firm boundaries on the family. *The Slap* focuses on the disparity between outward displays of parenting and

family life, and the realities that lie beneath. What can be shown in this analysis of Rosie is that she is a constructed maternal figure upon which societal concerns about mothering and the responsibility of childrearing can be projected. Rosie experiences breastfeeding as a practice which brings social exclusion and shame. Her milk cannot be separated from its sexual implications by the male characters who dominate the narrative. Verbal threats and violent overtones colour the representation of a mother whose milk and the reciprocal breastfeeding relationship with her son is experienced as her salvation.

Milk Fever, Room and *The Slap*: Containment, Threat and Loss

The preceding discussion of three twenty-first-century novels that focus on breastfeeding has drawn links between these texts and the image of the Madonna of the Milk. Within each novel the mother's breastmilk and her breastfeeding relationship with her child has salvific qualities. The mother finds a form of salvation from depression or grief and experiences joy in watching her infant thrive under her care and because of her milk. The example most directly resonant with the Marian image is Armande in *Milk Fever* because of her work as a wet nurse and the supposed magical qualities of her milk. Her ability to assist other mothers and babies helps her grief and advances her ideas about women's value and agency in sixteenth-century France. In more contemporary settings, Rosie and Ma find the breastfeeding relationship brings them out of depression and into a new knowledge of selfhood and resilience. It becomes a catalyst for change as they seek to better their circumstances. Rosie in *The Slap* deliberately chooses to move her family to a rural setting and begin a new life. In reference to Amy Middleton's work on maternal agency, Rosie can make changes in her life and move towards a better future because she is a well-resourced and educated woman, in comparison to Armande and Ma. However, Rosie still experiences the containment that is a key theme in the three novels. The way her character is framed by

the “gaze” of others (Mulvey) and the ways in which she transgresses social boundaries by her breastfeeding show a society trying to contain her maternal practices and reframe her maternal thinking to fit the hegemonic parenting practices of upwardly mobile urban Australians.

The theme of containment is more explicit in *Milk Fever*. Upon first refusing to nurse the Dauphin, Armande remained quietly in the village and attempted not to draw attention to herself. She restricted her movements because she was unsure how serious the threat upon her life might be after ignoring her King’s request. Her subsequent kidnapping by the King’s soldiers and the time they took to travel to Versailles meant that her milk supply permanently stopped, and she was physically unable to nurse his son. After giving medical evidence of this fact, she was imprisoned because, she was told, “I have lost my senses and am a danger to public decency” (225). Although freed after a number of days, she is caught in riots against the King outside the prison and set alight. Armande experiences numerous forms of containment in this novel, with an ever-growing sense of threat. Her body is contained and her milk lost under government control. Only the women believe in her work to empower women and children through her milk, but they too are forced into hiding. *Room* provides the most explicit example of physical containment and threat. Ma is vulnerable to Old Nick’s whims and experiences sexual violence and stillbirth while inside Room. Her experience Outside is of her society trying to separate herand her son, to force apart that contained, sustaining breastfeeding relationship.

These three novels utilise residual aspects of the Madonna of the Milk by narrating stories where the breastfeeding relationship between mother and child is much more than physical nourishment. The mothers are transformed by their breastfeeding capabilities, by the way in which they can bond with their child and support their development. They also change their outlook. Their breastfeeding relationship with their child provides joy in a hostile

environment. Where these texts challenge that medieval imagery is by incorporating additional themes that move beyond the concept of spiritual nourishment. In this way, I consider the representation of the mother as benefitting from the interdependence between herself and her child to be an emergent quality in these examples of fiction from the twenty-first century. The representation of the mother and child's connection focuses on the physical and emotional benefits of the relationship to both. This is counter to representations that portray being a mother as an erasure of selfhood or a series of losses.

The three novels show concern around the physical and social containment of breastfeeding mothers and the threat made by men to mothers' agency over their bodies. The analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that preceded these three novels is a striking example of these themes in a novel published twenty years prior. This historical fiction highlights how the breastfeeding body in literature can be seen as dangerous and unstable. Like *Room, The Slap* and *Milk Fever*, in *Beloved* men work to contain the body and mind of the breastfeeding mother who uses her milk in an attempt to claim her children from the bonds of slavery.

Conclusion: The Foregrounding of the Maternal Subject in Twenty-First-Century Fiction

> "Structures of feeling are no longer, then, in any sense 'the culture' of a period: they are, rather, precisely those particular elements within the more general culture which most actively anticipate subsequent mutations in the general culture itself; in short, they are quite specifically counter-hegemonic" (Milner, *Cultural Materialism* 59).

I argue that "structure of feeling" (59) most closely explains trends in twenty-first-century fiction on the subject of breastfeeding. As Frampton described in Morrison's work, literature depicting breastfeeding "foregrounds the mother's body" (145). It is in this foregrounding that current hegemonic practices of breastfeeding as a private relationship between mother

and infant have been challenged by Cowan's community-minded wet nurse Armande, by Ma who claims publicly "in this whole story, *that's* the shocking detail?" (Donoghue 292) and by Rosie who breastfeeds in defiance of all who claim to judge her. However, despite the "feeling" (Milner 59) that the maternal subject is one that will continue to shift boundaries in literature and across other disciplines, the prevalent themes of captivity and isolation require my analysis of breastfeeding in fiction to be tempered with the fact that these maternal characters have been written into boundaries from which they struggle to escape. So, although the physical work of maternity has been indeed brought to our attention, it remains contained. It is still judged and measured against standards of feminine propriety. Child social "training" (Ruddick 103) is used to call these mothers back to more socially acceptable ways of using their breasts and rid them of their milk. Therefore, it cannot be argued that fiction on the maternal has moved to an emergent form of understanding and appreciating the breastfeeding mother through literature. What is happening, I believe, are emergent ripples of change occurring within a still-dominant discourse that constrains the maternal body. The feminine breast remains a contested site; its sexual/maternal boundary may have been blurred somewhat by examples of fiction, such as those examined in this chapter, but the boundary is still there. What makes this fiction so rich is precisely that passion, that 'feeling', that change is needed in how mothers want their bodies and the work of their bodies represented and valued. These examples of fiction are examples of writing on the cusp of pre-emergent forms.

CONCLUSION: THE PRE-EMERGENGE OF A LITERATURE OF THE MATERNAL

This research project has revealed a variety of literary manifestations of maternity across a selection of fictional narratives from North America, the United Kingdom and Australia, published within the last fifty years. The novels and short stories chosen for close examination in this thesis have a focus on the bodily work of the mother through the stages of pregnancy, the postpartum period, childbirth and breastfeeding. These contemporary manifestations of new motherhood clearly utilise historically dominant images of the maternal body as self-sacrificing, chaste, bound within the role of wife and mother, and subject to vulnerability from the threat of men. These residual images of mothers have been discovered using the method of close reading, informed by a theoretical framework of maternal and feminist theory, and the overall concept of residual, emergent and dominant set out by Raymond Williams.

The chapter on pregnancy relied on Andrea O'Reilly's critique of patriarchal concepts of motherhood and madness in women's literature by Megan Rogers, and ideas about motherhood and freedom from Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Freidan. Especially pertinent to my research have been the theories of maternal thinking by Sara Ruddick, meanings of breastfeeding by Alison Bartlett, and work on the representation of childbirth by Carol Poston and Tess Cosslett. Ruddick and Bartlett's concepts helped to underpin my analysis of the chapter on breastfeeding, while Poston and Cosslett's scholarship formed the framework of the chapter on childbirth.

While not a thesis grounded in feminist psychoanalysis, ideas from French feminist theorists Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous as well as British scholar Margrit Shildrick about bodily boundaries and the limitations placed on the maternal body by patriarchal structures, have provided useful contexts to situate my concluding reflections on the representations of

pregnancy, the postpartum period and breastfeeding more generally. Williams' conceptual triad—dominant, residual, and emergent—has helped to form a coherent whole out of the three main embodiments explored in each of the main chapters by structuring my search for the most common representations of the maternal body and to explore their meanings, limitations and possibilities.

My analysis of the novels and short story found a clear trend that reinforced discourses and images about the maternal body as open to transgressive behaviour, for which the consequence is often death or madness. The maternal bodies presented across the texts are bound by the views of others who seek to impose limits on the maternal body. This constrained maternal body, often threatened with violence, is a residual interpretation of the reproductive feminine requiring clear boundaries between public and private spaces, and between the independent sexual woman and the maternal woman, "encumbered" (Chandler 272) with physical and emotional attachments to her children. There has been one notable example, in Lansens' *The Girls,* of a text that challenges current discourses around the possibilities of motherhood, and some aspects of many of the novels discussed do contain some emergent qualities. However, representations of the maternal body in fictional narratives have overall explored concerns with loss, containment and threat.

Pregnancy has been dealt with in novel form as a threat to bodily autonomy, sexual expression and individual freedom. "Loss" (Stephens, "Beyond Binaries" 91) remains a core concern within novels that explore the pregnant and postpartum experiences of first-time mothers. Pregnancy is a time of anxiety, as the mother perceives a change in her future autonomy and sense of selfhood. The stages of late pregnancy and the postpartum months are fraught with tension for the protagonists in these novels as they experience the loss of a previous autonomous life signified by paid employment and sexual exploration, and the constraints experienced by their society's expectations of motherhood. Motherhood as an

ideal and natural state (O'Reilly, "Patriarchal Motherhood" 65) is critiqued in these novels as women experience a profound crisis of self with the arrival of their infant. While the critique of the ideal and natural mother may be considered an emergent quality, in many of the novels, motherhood can be experienced as a series of failed transitions resulting in death or madness, the residual manifestations of the Victorian figure of the fallen woman. Women who reach maternal competence and a successful "matrescence" (Raphael 66) do so firmly in the role of wife as well as mother.

Childbirth is represented as a condition in which birthing women as fictional characters are vulnerable to distress and threat, in particular from men who seek to harm or overpower the woman and her newborn. The private sphere of the home is the place of safety and woman-centred care via a midwife, and it is the home that enables physical autonomy in birth. The medicalised model of childbirth is presented as male-dominated and inattentive to the actual needs of birthing women, as represented in the examples of historical fiction examined in the chapter on childbirth. Women birthing in captivity emerged as a commonality among a variety of texts ranging from Atwood and Morrison's novels published in the 1980s to Australian author Carey's 1991 *The Tax Inspector*, and moving beyond the end of the twentieth century to the 2010 publication of Donoghue's *Room*. There is a recurring presentation of childbirth under extreme conditions, a pivotal point in the plotline that helps the drama to unfold. Within the novels and short story discussed in both the pregnancy and the childbirth chapter, death hovers as a possible outcome for both childbirth and as a depiction of the mental anguish that accompanies these characters as they enter new motherhood.

Breastfeeding in novels from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century explores the containment and loss of a mother's milk by coercion from others. Again, threat and distress are crucial experiences for the main characters who have their breastfeeding choices judged

and misrepresented. Breastfeeding mothers who attempt to speak out encounter overwhelming societal forces that seek to minimise the importance of their milk. There is a strong sense of the salvific properties of the breastfeeding relationship between mother and child that brings about a feeling of wellbeing in the mother. The figure of the mother who nourishes her infant at her breast within this chapter recalls medieval Marian representations of sacrifice and salvation.

Not all the fiction selected for analysis in the thesis can be seen as emergent or having emergent qualities. This has been an aim of the research: to articulate what makes a text possess emergent qualities, as well as considering the residual images that writers may be drawing upon in their work. The following are the markers of three broad emergent qualities I have found in fiction on the maternal.

The first emergent quality is fiction that draws attention to contradictions in attitudes towards the maternal body, using the technique of contrast. This emergent quality has been particularly noticeable in historical fiction depicting childbirth and the figure of the midwife, as discussed in the chapter on childbirth and in particular the text *The Girls* by Lori Lansens. The technique of contrast is used when depicting two birth scenes across a novel with different outcomes, reiterating the positive outcomes of woman-centred care that allows the birthing mother safety and autonomy. This is in direct contrast to birthing scenes within the same novel that depict physician-led care as misogynistic. Some of the texts examined in the childbirth chapter continued to reflect dominant ideas about childbirth from an onlooker's point of view, despite demonstrating emergent qualities in the way in which models of care were represented in the fiction. Other texts not only use contrast to comment on maternity care but represent childbirth from the birthing mother's point of view, moving away from Poston's findings of a dominant onlooker view, demonstrating a deep engagement with the representation of the maternal body as a subjective experience.

The second emergent quality is fiction that develops the character of the mother. The fiction moves beyond the stereotype of the role of mother as nurturer, and it challenges this stereotype by providing a mother figure who is multi-layered. She has a history, often matrilineal, where she can understand herself as descending from a line of female ancestors. While these women may not necessarily be blood related, these novels detail a female history nonetheless that gives a strong sense of feminine identity. The mother and the story of other mothers within the community become the focus of the narrative, and such a focus grounds the protagonist within a social and familial network of women.

The third emergent quality is in narratives that draw attention to the interdependence of the mother/child dyad. In these narratives, the relationship between the mother and child is reciprocal and beneficial to the mother, rather than being seen as series of losses.

As a collection of representations, what do the concerns about the state of being pregnant, birthing a child or breastfeeding raised in these novels say about the maternal body and a literature of the maternal? The evidence from this close analysis of fifteen fictional texts points to a literature that, despite displaying some emergent qualities, overwhelmingly places limits on the maternal body from the repetition of dominant images of loss, death, madness, lack of autonomy and threat to safety. Feminist theories presented across the 1970s-1990s (Cixous; Kristeva; Ruddick; Shildrick) regarding the perception of the maternal body as dangerously transgressive to societal norms about married motherhood, remains a key touchstone in current representations of the maternal body. New understandings of the maternal body are not emerging quickly in literature. Instead, the form of the novel in particular shows a continuing reliance on the reproduction of residual images of the mother as a character working towards the Marian ideal of self-sacrifice, wedded commitment and eternally bonded to the infant in a relationship in which the mother receives little benefit. In my analysis, I cannot conclude that literature on the maternal has entered an emergent phase

where literature plays upon counter-cultural elements to inscribe new meanings upon the maternal body. What I see instead is the re-writing of previous concerns about the ideal role of the mother and the loss associated with upholding it. I can therefore conclude that literature which explores the maternal body is entering a pre-emergent stage, where a small number of texts such as Lori Lansens' *The Girls* and aspects of the other novels examined in the main chapters are seeking new and alternative ways of representing the pregnant, birthing and breastfeeding body. The range of novels analysed across the three main chapters do contain some emergent qualities, but considered together, these texts more firmly reiterate Victorian ideals of motherhood or else play upon second-wave feminist concerns about loss of freedom than explore new ideas about what motherhood as an institution (Rich) and mothering as a bodily experience may be.

Perhaps what restricts these novels from becoming "counter" (Bartlett, *Breastwork* 63) narratives and the majority of the texts in this thesis from being labelled "emergent" (Williams, "Base and Superstucture" 11) is a continued engagement with second-wave feminist ideas about the maternal experience as limiting. This has rendered the fifteen texts in this thesis as representative of a body of work on the maternal that, while expressing some emergent qualities, still maintain the presence of dominant ideals of motherhood. The fiction considered in this thesis can therefore be best described as being in a state of "pre-emergence" (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 126), shifting the ground somewhat from fiction that came a generation prior and moving towards the emergent while maintaining aspects of dominant concepts on the bodily and emotional work of the mother. The focus on independence, freedom and the public sphere valued in second-wave discourse, means a reduction in the value placed on the interdependence between mother and child, the freedom that may be experienced through mothering, and the opportunities for growth and possibility within the private domain as well as the public sphere.

I must consider here that there may be limitations in a study of this size. A survey of many more novels (and short stories, and poetry and plays) might have yielded different results in terms of the emergent qualities found in literature with a focus on the work of the maternal body. It is also a possibility that an analysis of different types of media portrayals about the maternal experience, such as memoir, would yield different results. However, the map I have provided future scholars of literature on the maternal body is useful because of its depth of analysis, rather than generalisations. It is through close analysis of fiction in future maternal scholarship that the residual layers can be critiqued to reveal potentially emergent qualities within texts that outwardly focus on loss or restraint. I look forward to analysing new fiction that demonstrates aspects of the maternal that opens possibilities for setting new definitions for the representation of the maternal body, rather than reproducing dominant ideas about the boundaries that define mothers. Critique carried out in this thesis pinpoints the over-reliance on residual images of the maternal, not to undermine the literary achievements of these individual novels, but to encourage new possibilities. There can be no genuine engagement with a literature of the maternal if images of mothers in fiction are simply creative reproductions and not innovations.

The three textual analytical chapters presented in this thesis centre around the bodily work of a mother and her corresponding experiences. These chapters show how these novels and short story were informed by discourses around the maternal body that will, in turn, influence how literature on the maternal may develop over the coming decades. In particular, the chapter on childbirth in fiction demonstrates the extent to which discourses around intervention and natural childbirth influence the growth of historical fiction in the early twenty-first century, foregrounding the vital role of the midwife in providing safe and compassionate woman-centred care at home for the birthing mother. Reflecting upon Harrington's article "Knowing the social world through literature" and Julie Stephens'

expansion on this concept connects my research to the importance of analysing literary forms as one of the important ways to understand social constructs and provide depth to social research.

The fiction presented in this thesis has been informed by discourses of maternity, such as birthing care, advocacy for breastfeeding and second-wave feminist concerns around the autonomy of the female body. What these texts may posit overall is a limiting view of the maternal body. My contribution to the wider forms of social research that Harrington and Stephens aspire to see more of, show an overall concern with the limitations of the maternal body and the threat to the maternal body imposed by others. These views, as displayed through fiction, would put forward a literary discourse on maternity that reinforces views of the "leakiness" (Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies* 78) of the maternal body and the need for clear boundaries. Not only is the maternal body bound by limitations, but the emphasis among the many texts, particularly in the pregnancy chapter on motherhood as loss, creates a continuing discourse of motherhood as a state of losing yourself whilst being restrained by others. While there are emergent qualities present among numerous texts examined in this thesis, future scholarship may demonstrate a wider array of other texts that remove the maternal body from its perceived limitations and celebrate its possibilities in ways that enrich the maternal experience rather than take away from it.

My remarks on the future possibilities of fiction on the maternal are grounded in the contribution that this thesis has made to literary scholarship. I have outlined a method of close analysis of the maternal body in its pregnant, birthing and breastfeeding embodiments. This has not been undertaken in this detailed manner before, especially with the inclusion of a number of Australian texts, and texts published in the last twenty years. My research has expanded upon the work of Carol H. Poston charting the representations of childbirth in the Western canon of the early-twentieth century. She provided a map to interpreting the

representations of childbirth, which I have expanded to include works beyond North America and the United Kingdom, including Australian works, and works beyond childbirth including pregnancy and breastfeeding. My work has contributed to the expansion of that map, to define trends and key images useful for future scholarship to be able to determine the beginning of an emergent literature of the maternal.

Future writing on the maternal experience contains numerous possibilities for shifting the paradigm of maternal representation. In the words of Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa":

> She must write herself, because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history. (880)

Cixous calls women to write "her self . . . and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (875) because "writing is precisely *the very possibility of change"* (879; italics in original). I see this "new insurgent" (880) writing as like my search for the emergent in literature on the maternal. Cixous seeks writing about women's bodies that is rebellious and dissatisfied with its current limitations and boundaries. She believes women's bodies have been silenced and there is continuing evidence of that, three decades later, in my articulation of the limits placed upon the maternal body across this thesis. Fiction on the maternal has always held the possibility of change. However, dominant cultural ideas about the maternal as private have led to literary representations that, despite holding the possibility of being "insurgent" (Cixous 880) or "emergent" (Williams, "Base and Superstructure" 11), have helped to replicate culturally dominant ideas about mothers and their role.

In future work, I would like to engage with broader questions of a literature of the maternal, and its future pathway. Despite seeing the beginnings of a literature on the maternal

(Elkin; Gurton-Wacher), I think it is premature to celebrate such a diverse body of work about the same topic without first having a critical language by which to analyse its meanings and representations. The effect of supposing that there is a literature of the maternal, and that all texts about motherhood are automatically assigned to it, assumes that it simply exists due to the sheer number of texts about a certain topic. Literature of the maternal shows its potential for paradigm-shifting understandings of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding when it "foregrounds the maternal body" (Frampton 145) and remains aware of the intersection of history and culture playing out in the representation of the mother. The mother would not simply be a function of her place in history or culture but an active agent in her own life. I look forward to seeing what new fiction and a maternal reading of existing texts may offer our current understandings of the maternal body, not as a site of restraint or contestation, but as a site of "transformations" (Cixous 880) of maternity.

APPENDIX A: LACTATION OF OTHER RELIGIOUS FIGURES IN CHRISTIAN ART

The Lactation of St Bernard. Alonzo Cano. 1650. Prado Museum, Madrid. https://www.christianiconography.info/Wikimedia%20Commons/bernardLactCano.html accessed 4 May, 2022.

St Anna Galaktrotophousa. 13th century. Metropolitan Church of St Stephen, Kastoria, Greece. 'A Rare 13th Century Fresco of St Anna Galaktotrophousa' https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2014/07/a-rare-13th-century-fresco-of-saint.html July 29, 2014, accessed 4 May, 2022.

The infant Virgin Mary being fed by her mother St Anne.

APPENDIX B: FURTHER IMAGE OF THE MADONNA OF THE MILK

Madonna Del Latte. Ambrogio Lorenzetti *1325-1348*

Diocesan Museum of Holy Art, Siena.

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