

Jonah T.

Cottonwood, California

Matrilineage and Disruption

Oil paint and charcoal on MDF panels

My research focused on mother-child relationships and lineage. I specifically read the journal article “Mothering as a Psychological Experience,” by Constance Barlow and Kathleen Cairns. They discuss the process of becoming a mother and how this affects women. All the participants shared how their lineage has altered their own mothering experience. As a child, I was hyper-aware of my lineage and the stories of the mothers in my family. I was raised by women, and yet I am not a woman myself. I am interested in my own disruption of my family’s strong ancestry of women because of my transness, and the impact this has on my family and generations to come. This curiosity broadens to how personal identity and stories changes all families’ dynamics and lineage.

The idea for this piece originated from my desire to create a paneled, suspended, and double-sided work. This evolved to become a manipulation of traditional “Madonna and Child” imagery by echoing shapes and forms in the painting. The use of oil paint is reminiscent of the pre-raphaelite paintings that influenced me while the split panels and abstraction are more contemporary. As I explored abstraction, I also thought about how to bring my ideas from my research into a visual form. Through the shifting and separation of the “Madonna and Child,” I created a repetition and cycle of mothers and children. They blur, deconstruct, and reform as they become farther apart in distance and time, similar to how we are fragmented and reworked in stories and in separation from those who raised us.

A Traitor to the Matriarchy



Jonah T.

The Oxbow School

OS48

Writer's Note: I am incredibly interested in family relationships, dynamics, and troubles. In one of the phone calls I had with my grammy to prepare for writing, she said, "you really want to know what makes people tick huh!" The inner workings of the personal and social are both easier and more difficult to investigate in family units. I love this nuance. I have been examining my own family for years now as a part of my personal growth and my fascination with familial structures. This paper is the culmination of this observation, the love I have for my family, and the knowledge I've gained as a part of growing up.

I remembered to take out the earrings my grammy gave me before we left for the meeting. While I go off to listen to people tell me about my "transgenda"¹, the earrings will sit in the jewelry box, wondering why I had to shed the feminine markers. I get into the car while my grammy turns on the engine. The drive to the emotionally draining high school is very common for me, but it feels new after being away. This spring break feels more like spring cleaning, washing my mind down with the familiarity of the cow-spotted landscape.

As she drives, she updates me on all the family happenings. One of my ears listens while the other is preoccupied with the insects crawling in my brain, feeding me with anticipated scenarios: a man punching me as I leave the stuffy room, slurs thrashing against my eardrums.

After she had finished her story, she said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you about this. When Mr. Bennett called me in to ask about your past for your recommendation, he also asked me... shoot... how did he say it? He wanted to know if you decided to be this way because you had a strong mom or because you had a terrible dad. Like if you wanted to be a better man than he was." She looks over to me as we pull into the drop-off lane.

¹ The term "transgenda" is a combination of the words trans and agenda.

“Do you mean like why I’m trans?” At this point, I have no clue as to why my principal would be concerned about why I “decided” on my gender identity.

“No, it wasn’t that,” she starkly stated, “more like why you are the way you are. I really wish I could remember how he worded it.” Her face scrunched and contorted as she scoured her memory.

“The way I am determined and that kind of thing?” I’m guessing “that kind of thing” pertains to the honors student, community service, hardworking, and high-achieving identity that I have been given.

“Yeah yeah, that kind of thing.”

“Well, what did you say?”

“I think it’s a little of both, but I don’t know.”

I can see two cars behind us now, so despite my confusion about my principal’s question, I had to leave. I exited the safe shell of the blue Kia to enter the high school library and soon-to-be battleground of fear and ignorance that is a school board meeting. I walked in to hear the second half of my classmate’s speech during public comment. The rest of the meeting was a two hour blur of closed-minded people talking about things they don’t understand.

I wish I could answer his question. I wish I could share the step-by-step process of how I was built from both my mother’s bravery and my father’s assholery. Although, everyone knows that your parents change you, and their parents change them. It’s one of those inescapable truths. It’s like when you run over a deer. You know you’ll kill it as soon as you look it in the eyes. You can’t swerve. You can’t un-run it over.

* * *

My house is brimming with ghosts. The rural three-bed and two-bath was built around the sixties and was the home of my great-grandparents and their three sons. I pass their graduation photos in the huge collage photo frame to leave the house every morning. My grandpa, the youngest of the three sons, made the frame along with a majority of the wooden furniture in the house. Most of the photos include dead people I've never met: strangers, and spectators of my life. My house is a compacted garage sale with wares of objects and conduits that are doomed to never be bought: great-grandma Julia's porcelain dolls, my mom's Trolls, 80's Barbies, great-grandpa's bowling trophies, cupboards overflowing with china, dozens upon dozens of deer antlers that line the trusses of the garage, and creepy-as-hell knickknacks. Everything once had a life outside of the cupboard, being used and played with, but as soon as they hit those shelves they are as lifeless as my mom and grandpa sitting in the urns above them.

Death is preserved in the house. It's shrine-like. Glass protected or cremated. Hung up or displayed. A photo of my mom and grandpa at her homecoming is hung prominently in the living room right across from their urns. It is not nearly the size of the house's grief but close enough. The grainy and overexposed photo is the only acceptable one we have of them together. From behind the couches, they watch us play card games, tell secrets, and hurt each other. More spectators.

Sometimes the audience comes out of the walls. They sit on the couches with us every once in a while. A house pretty much has to be haunted with so many dead things in it.

One alleged form people have spotted ghosts in is glowing orbs that float and fly around. One night my grandma noticed a small orb whooshing out of the kitchen, around my dog, behind the TV, and finally around all of us in the living room. She took a video and while watching it, our dog looked at it as it passed him. Nobody in the living room sees a thing.

“Did you guys see that?!”, she exclaimed.

We all shook our heads and gathered around her throne-like chair as she shared the video with us. She decreed the orb to be truth through the moving frames. Once the video was finished, she turned the lights off and her phone camera on. She had officially morphed into a ghost hunter, searching for the return of a flying orb.

She began to convulse with excitement, “Wait.. oh! Come here! Look! Look!”

The orb came back with friends. The phone screen became a portal to a dimension of spirits. Outside of the screen, everything remained as it was, but in the portal dozens of still circles were visible. The room was silent at the sight and nothing moved except for the phone. She lifted her shaky hand to wipe the camera lens and when the dust left the lens, The orbs left with it.

“Oh.” She deflated at the realization that the remnants of her family members were nothing but grime on her phone.

We were again silent, until her sharp laughter burst the tension of the quiet. It was a deep, calculating, and mourning laughter. She cackled in the hope that her aspirations would leave her lungs to rest.

We joined her.

A large part of raising children is looking at how you were raised. In other words, it is, “encountering the ghosts of mothering received” (Barlow & Cairns, 1997). These ghosts can guide, share, or possess. My grammy’s ghosts are ingrained in her skin. They seep into her eyes and show her the way. “The ghosts of mothering received” are revived in her actions. The simple “sweethearts” she calls my sister and me and the compassion for what she might not understand. They belong not only to her, not only to me but to her mother and the mothers before her.

The ghosts of negligent mothers are revived in my actions. They are revived by long pauses and slithering tones. Matriarchs spoilt and tarnished from matriarchs past.

* * *

I am wearing a one-of-a-dozen green and purple chevron outfits that make me melt into the rhythms of the group. We are practicing a cheer for the next Junior Cub football game. The haggle of cheer moms in the bleachers resemble birds in branches. Everyone's hair is carefully feathered and some of the faces are meticulously painted. My grammy is up in the stands squawking away with my Aunt Deb when they see them out of the corners of their eyes.

Birds of a morose feather approach the fence separating us, the cheering chicks, from them. Grown and hardened by winds and time. My paternal grandmother and her daughter are watching me perform. My body begins to harden, my once elastic limbs slowly crystalizing to restraining rock. Trying to continue with the cheer, I use the reflective strips of plastic as my iridescent feathers. I keep moving my pom poms to the beat of the music, but my dance of intimidation is not successful. They are still observing me.

They do not belong to me and I do not belong to them. Not after this last year. They have betrayed my sister and me in every way imaginable, so I was forced to cut off their branches of the family tree. They didn't notice the pruning though, so I decided to make it apparent.

My grammy stayed 20-30 feet away from me to show them she was not influencing what I chose to do. The cheer moms could see the nine-year-old chick approaching the women and watched impatiently.

“We don’t want you here and I think you should leave!” I promptly turned around, walked past my grammy, and went under the bleachers to have my panic attack in peace.

Rejected Matriarchs are those who are failed providers and entitled heiresses. They may wallow, whine, or scowl, but once they have been denounced, they've lost all their leverage. As a descendant, I hold a matriarch's power, and I can take it away.

* * *

My grammy is the author of my family's story. She carefully tends to each of our chapters while giving us motivation and encouragement to write our own. I used to listen to her tell me about my family and all its members. The real story. No fairytale, censored, scrubbed-down renditions. I would like to say that she told me both the good stories as well as the bad ones, but these labels can't be separated into neat squares. Although there is one person I've never heard anything bad about: Kim, her daughter, my mother.

As I became an adolescent, I began to poke and prod at my grammy for more information, any information. I would jab and jab until it bled out of her in shining drops. I know that it must be hard for a mother to share the ugly truths about her daughter, but my pure curiosity got in the way of considering this. I wouldn't be this curious though if I had time to get to know her daughter myself. The most frustrating thing about these stories I do get are the ones that tell me, "You're just like her. You look like her. You act like her. She would be so proud of you ya know?" My family has good intentions despite their expectations that I would magically grow into another Kim like a propagated piece of succulent.

I guess their expectations aren't too preposterous. Most daughters end up like their mothers. Fawns have to grow up into does. My face is already a reflection of my mother's. I have her triangular nose and chubby cheeks. I have the same wide and flat smile. Our hair parts are opposite but they mirror each other.

While I was sitting in the passenger seat on the way to school, I had the mirror down to putting on earrings.

The car was desolately quiet when she uttered, “I just looked over and the top of your face looked just like her.” Her voice kept rising like the crawling upwards of a roller coaster car before the drop. She struggled to catch her breath as the altitude rose. The shock of seeing a long-gone daughter had thrown her back in time. Nothing can prepare someone for that plunge.

Donald W. Winnicott, an English psychoanalyst, proposed that infants see themselves and their emotional states reflected in their mother’s faces. In his book, *Playing and Reality*, he says that our mothers are the first mirrors we have (Winnicott, 112). We look into the depths of their features to make sure, in spite of everything we are presented, we exist. Mothers assure us, and we grow up in this simulated truth as if it were a shell.

In my case, the shell was constricting, and yet everyone was still seething when I cracked out of it. I broke the cycle. There's no need to ask whether the chicken or the egg was first now. It doesn't matter, does it? What matters is the matrilineage gasped at the sight of my betrayal. My trans self smashed it to pieces. Eggshells dissolved into the floor, beginning their journey for reuse. I believe that the mirror can function oppositely as well. Mothers look to their offspring and expect to see an augmented reflection of themselves. They need proof of their existence through the results of reproduction. *If I brought that into existence, then I must exist.* What happens if this primarily dyadic relationship is broken? You look to the next link; the next generation. *If something I brought into existence created that, then I must exist.* Gaps have to be filled with somebody, it just happened to be me. My face and my identity could reflect a lost daughter to a searching mother.

Now that ability is lost to my masculinity. My Grammy lost a daughter’s life to a man. She lost a granddaughter to manhood.

* * *

We walk into Wally World and let the rays of the fluorescent lights tear into our ears and skin. A small sacrifice we make for groceries. We are a four-person nuclear family ready to divide and conquer this Big Box. When it was time to split, the grouping wasn't a question. I followed my father and my sister followed my mother. We ventured down the aisles to get shaving cream and razors. Later that night I would spread the shaving cream on my face like he did his own. I would watch and copy, watch and copy, until the cream was gone.

"Daddy's Girl" became one of my first titles. I wore it like a proud badge. *See! I'm different from other girls. My dad takes me to Home Depot with him. My dad showed me how to shoot a BB gun.* I was taken away by manliness. I was sharp shootin', nerf gun totin' and the owner of untamed hair. This should've been a warning: a warning to not get too attached to the idea of me growing up into a beautiful young lady. A princess. The warning was not received by all.

My grammy's lips are pulled taut on her face. She tries not to let them free, instead, she creates parameters before speaking. She's crafted this sentence and it has to come out right. "I don't know if I can call you that. Your mom gave you a great name and I don't know how she'd feel about me calling you something else." She had been tearing up before but this was the puncher. The tears were rushing down now and there was nothing she or I could do about it.

By renouncing the name of the baby girl I once was thought to be, I have betrayed my mother and I have betrayed my grandmother by asking her to call me something alien to our lineage.

* * *

My great-grandma Julia wrote down all of her recipes and neatly organized them in a small recipe box. Ornate black and white patterns with little roosters dancing across the sides. Just big enough to fit a stack of handwritten and laminated note cards. She crafted one of these boxes for each of her granddaughters. Whenever my mom would pull out the thin card and follow her grandmother's words, we'd consume the love and care of recipes from the past. In doing this I connected with a woman I have never met, but recognized in my blood.

The women of my family are tightly and intricately knit. They are often best friends with their mothers and daughters. They tell their stories and pass down their recipes to ensure that their existence is known by daughters to come.

My grammy passed down a story to me about Edith Johnson, my great-great-grandmother. She was a mother of seven-ish kids, one being the great-grandfather who raised my grandpa and died in my house. It was the Great Depression and she was recently left by her husband. This winter was especially cruel to her and she had no food for her children. Luckily, Edith had noticed a deer stuck in her fence, so she did the only thing she could do. She grabbed a rock and bashed the skull in of the young buck until the pink mush of its memories spilled out. Its inexperienced blood sunk into the snow, turning it into a splattered cherry red slushie. The venison kept her children fed at the cost of being irrevocably changed.

All of our lineages yield not only stories, but surprises. Blood always seems to have a secret of its own.

I am on the phone with my grammy while she tells me stories of mothers I do not know, when she mentions, "You know I was looking at my ancestry and I saw that we're actually related to Susan B. Anthony. I thought it was a scam but I looked down the line and she's in there."

My great-great-something aunt, Susan Brownell Anthony, was born into a Quaker family a month before the Missouri Compromise was approved. At 17 she collected anti-slavery petitions.

She was colleagues with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglas. She founded the National Woman Suffrage Association with Stanton and created the newspaper *The Revolution*. She created a legacy.

In middle school, I was a very adamant and dedicated feminist. Little me would've screamed if I'd heard the news then. My classmates wouldn't have stopped hearing about it. I can picture my 5th-grade self in a "Susan B. Anthony's Niece" t-shirt. It's probably a good thing I didn't know then.

The fact still stands that I could've been part of a legacy. I could've made the ghosts of my matrilineage proud. Could've been the "strong woman." I could've soared. Although a legacy is nothing more than a reminder of the dead. An unforgettable token balanced on my shoulder.

* * *

The etymology of the name Jonah goes back to the Hebrew word Yonah, meaning dove. When I was scrolling through the "J boy names" section of babynames.com, it juttred out at me. It was calling out to me with a name I had not yet been called or called myself. I liked the softness of it, the peace associated with doves, and how comforting it felt to sign it in my journal.

My grammy has her own way of acquiring comfort. She communicates with the dead, which is to say she chats with her husband and daughter at night or while driving. After a few tough conversations, she started calling me Jonah. There was no specific moment or marker. She just made the switch.

In a matter-of-fact tone, she declared, "I had lots of long chats with your mom about it. She would've wanted you to be happy." The tears flooded my face now, so I looked away under the guise of admiring the scenery out the window, even though I knew she could hear my sniffles.

I've never really thought of my family as being a single-parent household because I've never been raised by just one person. My Grammy convenes with the ghosts. She collaborates with her mother, her daughter, and her husband. Her predecessors taught her to be a mother. Therefore, I am brought up by thousands. A conjugation of matriarchs. Women of the past and present.

And yet I am not one of them. I sit on the edge of a bubble, a fly stuck in the fragile sphere. My trans identity extracted me from this woven family tree, but who would I be if I weren't a disruption?

The matriarchy gasped at the sight of my broken eggshell, but they failed to see the dove soar from its cage.

Bibliography

Axinn, W., Barber, J., & Thornton, A. (1998). The Long-Term Impact of Parents' Childbearing Decisions on Children's Self-Esteem. *Demography*.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3004012.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%>

In this article, the authors discussed the impacts of an unwanted pregnancy on the child's long-term self-esteem. It was found that children resulting from unwanted pregnancies had significantly lower self-esteem from anticipated pregnancies. The article speculates that children with parents that were involved and supportive during childhood make an outstanding contribution to good self-esteem.

Barlow, C. A., & Cairns, K. V. (1997). Mothering as a psychological experience: A grounded theory exploration. *Canadian Journal of Counseling*.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ555253.pdf>

This journal article investigates the experiences of mothers from deciding to have children, to the children being of 12 years or younger. The participants in the study shared their thoughts on how they decided to have children, how their relationships with their mothers affect their mothering abilities, how they adapted to a new lifestyle, the replenishing qualities of children to their mental health, and more.

East, L., Hutchinson, M., Power, T., & Jackson, D. (2018). "being a father": Constructions of fatherhood by men with absent fathers. *Journal of Family Studies*, 26(3), 477–487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2018.1459308>

The journal article examined men's experiences with fatherhood while having absent fathers themselves. The men collectively stated that they felt ill-prepared for fathering

without having a role model. Many looked to other male figures in their lives as well as their mothers. Their turmoil with fatherlessness encouraged them to be active and participating parents to their children. The authors use this information to suggest that an increase in parenting education for men would benefit future communities and fathers

Kenway, J., & Fahey, J. (2008). Melancholic mothering: Mothers, daughters and family violence. *Gender and Education*, 20(6), 639–654.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802447945>

The authors analyzed and compared two mother-daughter relationships and the theories of Freud, Irigaray, Silverman, Eng, and Kazanjian. The theories focused on loss and melancholy as a psychological state. The authors applied these theories to the families' current circumstances. They also explore the melancholy that has been passed down through generations of daughters and how it changes their behavior

Winnicott, D. W. (1971). Mirror Role of Mother and Family in Child Development. In *Playing and Reality* (pp. 111–119). essay, Tavistock Publications.

This chapter discusses the mirror phenomenon between mothers and infants. When the baby looks at the mother's face, they believe that they see themselves, but as they mature, they begin to analyze the mother's face as other than themselves. Winnicott showed that infants' ideas of self are directly tied to their mothers. Winnicott continues to discuss how self-image changes people's lives and their perspectives of who they are through examples of his psychoanalysis patients.