

How She Becomes Herself: The Artist as the Daughter of the Artist

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I am at the centre,
I am at the centre,
I am at the centre,

and you are at the centre,
and you are at the centre,
and you are at the centre,

and we are at the centre,
and we are at the centre,
and we are at the centre,

and She is at the centre,
and She is at the centre,
and She is at the centre.



Where does experience separate – and where does it meet?

“Spirituality is a love affair – a love affair with existence.”

(Chopra, 2006, p. 16)

The term *spirituality* was purposefully never defined in the accredited Women’s Spirituality Master of Arts degree program I graduated from. In my scholarly movement since completing this degree in San Francisco into doctoral studies in Education in Canada, I find that the idea of having to define ‘spirituality’ for my research often comes up. I resist its definition. I like Shambavi’s idea, that it is a *love affair with existence*. An affair I am always reaching for, at times having and at others wondering where all the love went. The notion of spirituality, as a part of an emerging, yet ancient, knowledge tradition of women’s spirituality (Birnbaum, 2005; Jenett, 2008; Spretnak, 1982) moves beyond exclusive male-centred religious understandings of such (Braud, 2005; Irigaray, 1993), to re-find and centre divine mothers, goddesses, and the sacred dimensions of women’s daily lives. The experience of spirituality is understood as immanent and transcendent, as being located within ourselves, including our bodies and sexuality, the Earth as sacred, the more-than-human world and cosmos of trees, rocks, animals, stars and the spirits of places.

I am drawn in my life path towards female spiritual leaders and teachers such as Vicki Noble (1991), Judy Grahn (1993), and Luisah Teish (1985), women who take the enactment of women’s freedom within feminism to its spiritual inheritances and dimensions. These women support a way of being in the world that sanctifies and has names for my own lived experiences of *connectivity* with nature, with others, with myself - engaging sacred, mindful and socially transformative circles, rituals and classrooms with other women. We speak, experience and co-create new and old sacred worlds with each other. There is a deep, soul-full Mother of education going on in this process, and a lot of work being done by women to make it happen at all. In my dissertation research I am studying women’s stories and lived senses of this creativity, of spirituality, and relationships to self/other, female divinity and the Earth as an alive being, in networks of interconnection and inter-being. I study all this through the multi-vocal (many voiced) practice of women-centred education developed in the Women’s Spirituality degree I graduated from.

I would say *spirituality* is a calling within people’s lives to serve, care and relate to the world from an interior place rooted as deep inter-relation / inter-being (Crawford, 2005) to the ‘exterior’ world of others, to act for personal and social justice from a core of oneself and others as holy and whole. Connectivity seems important to me in this regard, that we weave and write threads both within ourselves and outwards towards others, mirrored in a relational practice of research that catches the intimate details of the weaving. In this way, researching auto/biographically has a rich herstory within feminist,

and especially race/class conscious and lesbian feminist scholarship (Anzaldúa, 1999; Grahn, 2009; Lourde, 1984; Rich, 1977), as in the well-known idiom of “the personal is political.” Such writing is a central feature of the curriculum within Women’s Spirituality education. Women’s writing and truth telling to each other and the world both frees and complexifies solidified understandings of social/cultural/racial/sexual/political identities and contexts of our lives.

In my own life writing, my life as a daughter and a mother is completely mixed up with my self-knowing, my ways of being in the world. This fact of mothering I would call my ‘maternal inheritance,’ that which is located within any mother, but is also located within the culture at large. This inheritance runs from the more diffuse mothers, the mystical mothers, the ones not so obviously present but always here and there in day to day life in the way that mothering is so central to existence. Yet mothering is so absent from scholarly discourses beyond a psychology or biology of its experience. Writer Hélène Cixous speaks of the demons we carry from lost histories and lineages that we block out in daily life, how “we are all walking on a volcanic earth” (2008, p. 5). At times I feel an aching despair around mothering, which may be the lost religion of the Earth itself. I feel despair in relation to my own mother and the invisibility of the day to day work I perform in maintaining my own children’s lives. Beyond *demons*, Cixous notes other more “dazzling” obscurities, that of love for and with other beings, the points of connection “where ecstasy and divination are to be found” through each other’s bodies and beings (p. 5), how we are created beings at all. In a way everything (and nothing) came from my mother, now my own children come from (and don’t come from) me.

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Story

I have a mixed media art practice in photography, video, textiles and performance. I also worked within pre-regulation Canadian midwifery as a home birth attendant and post partum caregiver to women and babies. My life writing research within women’s spirituality education is located within this artist/arts-based and embodied, birthing, mother lens (Jordan, 2009; 2007). To describe the interweaving in my life of thought, feeling, and art, the way that female-centred knowing and spiritual sourcing can come through art for me, is to tell a story from the fall of 2008. The art show *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Butler, 2007) came to the Vancouver Art Gallery, in Vancouver, British Columbia, for the fall season. I enrolled my 11 year-old daughter in what I saw as an incredible opportunity of a theatre program for girls. The girls would be going into the art show, looking at art made by women of my daughter’s grandma’s generation, and collaborating to perform their own scripts and skits based on art pieces in the show.

I thought, “Wow, what an education, Women’s Studies 101 in art and performance for 11-15 year olds, sign her up!” A performance enthusiast, she was a willing participant. Given what I later heard about the censorship of this show by children’s

school programs in ALL of the American cities it toured, this theatre program, let alone the fact that schools groups were touring the show in Vancouver, was itself a significant educational feat.

Given sensitivity to the representation of copious female nudity throughout the exhibit, it was suggested by the girls' theatre instructor to first tour the show myself and let her know if there was any content I would not want my daughter to view. There was a definitely censored section devoted to the development of the pornographic industry during the 1970's and women artists' responses or co-option into this movement. This part of the exhibition overtly displayed examples of pornographic materials from those times, where female breasts, bodies, bums and vulvas were on graphic view. This section, hidden away from full view, was off limits to the girls. But I wouldn't have limited them from seeing any of the other art, including the post-coital, realism-informed-by-colour-abstraction paintings by Joan Semmel (1975), where the lower halves of a male and female body lay naked, relaxed on their shared bed. The man's penis is visible, but is inert and soft upon his lap. Or the images of artist Ana Mediata (*Untitled – Glass on Body*, 1972) with plexi-glass pressed on to her naked breasts, back and bottom, holding the tension of what it feels to be squashed, to be pressed against, such invisible walls.

One of my daughter's favourite pieces was the *Crocheted Environment*, by Faith Wilding (1972, re-made 1995). In this 3-dimensional installation, intricate nets and webs fill a space you could walk inside of. The girls in the theatre program poked their arms and limbs gently through circular openings of this matrix of thread, weaving themselves together in laughter. What better place for my daughter to learn something of the impact of the patriarchal times we live in, how women artists have responded to, transformed and attempted to re-shape these times.

Because she was in this program every Saturday morning for three months, and because I had a gallery membership, I found myself wandering into the show most Saturday mornings. I got to know the security guards, including the one who helped me adjust the film projection to the right day when Friday's film track was on instead of Saturday's. I would have missed viewing Alanis Obomsawin's film, *Mother of Many Children* (1977) that tracks survival and cultural re-vival in the lives and activism of First Nations women and mothers across Canada. In fact, an archive of women's film and video work was playing all over *WACK!* in multiple TV screens. I began to compile mental lists of videos to view while I could, where else would I ever see all this work again? I noticed myself inhabiting the gallery like an extension of my living room, moving between the rooms and the art, sometimes sitting with a piece for hours, the collection becoming more and more familiar with passing weeks, details I missed one week surfaced in the next.

One Saturday morning my younger, 6 year-old, daughter came with me. As we strolled through the gallery together, she was drawn to watch the videos and became transfixed by Judy Chicago's pyrotechnics performances (*Atmospheres*, 1967-74). Judy's big hair flows in slow motion in the credits, as she walks in slow motion through billowing plumes of colourful smoke. The video documents Chicago's numerous performances of flaming, exploding plumes of colour going off in LA and California locations, parks and art gallery steps. My young daughter especially loved a performance on the Pacific coast beach, where nude women sit very still in meditation postures, their

bodies painted in different colours, until plumes of coloured smoke go off around them in mini explosions. My daughter thought this was very exciting work, later asking, “Is Judy Chicago still alive?”—somehow aware of the historicity of this work in her 6-year-old experience.

Attending and re-attending this art work, both alone and with my daughters, what I haven’t explained about the impact of this show on me is the part about my own mother. When I say that this show was my daughters’ grandma’s generation, what I mean to say is that *my mother* was an artist who came of age in this moment of the 1970’s. She came of age as an artist and as a woman who chose to live in ways her working-class Irish immigrant parents, my Irish grandparents whom I visited weekly as a child in urban Toronto, were never able to enter. Yet I am heir to these times of my mom’s life. I did live these years with and through her experiences, in what were also my experiences. Where does our experience separate – and where does it meet?

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In order to escape the mythological Antigone’s fate, feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray speaks of how the “world of women must successfully create an ethical order and establish the conditions necessary for women’s actions” (1993, p. 108). This must be a vertical and horizontal order, where mother-daughter genealogies pass forward a centrality of female subjectivity, while the “sisterhood of women” works to build horizontal actions in women’s lives. This order describes a socially transformative vision of education by women, through women’s work done both within and outside of families. My mother’s artistic education was something she chose to pursue, though it went beyond the understanding of her natal family as a working path. Irigaray notes that the vertical order of mother-daughter relations is little known or understood in our times, because systemic “female becoming” suppressed within such patriarchal family relations (p. 108). My mother’s ‘becoming’ was at a time of tension between expectation and desires of women to enter marriage and raise families, and the explorations of women beyond such fixed gender identities. My mom occupied the city as her own in a way that

my grandparents never really settled into, despite their living for more than 40 years in Toronto after leaving Ireland. Their East End Toronto home was a fixture of my childhood and young adult life, we lived in separate but parallel worlds.

Through the artwork in *WACK!* I was *aesthetically* transported to my childhood, growing up with my mom in the 1970's Toronto art 'scene', if such a thing or time might be called a *scene*. Wandering in the Vancouver Art Gallery, I started to realize a particularly embodied response to the art, and its relation to my own mother. My cell fibres responded with something akin to aesthetic, sensory recognition, to the material artistic tropes of this time; the uses of paint, collages of found objects, the so recognizable type-writer lettering on art pieces documenting lists of the artist's actions and titles; the style of clothes that my mother hand sewed for both herself and me; the photocopy aesthetics and B&W images that I was weaned on as a child artist. I could FEEL my childhood in a tint of white paint dripping over canvas, the stacking of found objects in assembled sculpture, the images of the women, and the ways of making things that my mother and her friends were experimenting with in materials, sound, text, performance.

The timeliness of reviewing, exhibiting and publishing this epoch of art work, which was not actually taught to me within my 1980/90's BFA curriculum, is described by curator Cornelia Butler in making "the case that feminism's impact on art of the 1970's constitutes the most influential international movement of any during the post war period" (2007, p. 15). The archive of art within *WACK!* brings forward hidden histories/herstories of this art movement, as if its only being 'discovered' now, what was really an 'anti-movement.' Butler describes feminism being an "open-ended" system containing "wildly divergent political ideologies and practices" (p. 15) and how many of the artists within this exhibition would not identify as "feminist" given the various locations of their practices. Yet she contends that all of the artists reinforced "two central tenets: the personal is political, and all representation is political" (p. 15).

I didn't really anticipate how I would find my mother in this show, and my childhood self who followed her from event to event, art openings, parties, performances. Parties, gatherings of friends and artists, were big in 1970's Toronto. My mom never hired a babysitter, I just went along to things as part of life. I would just be with all the adults, or other kids who happened to be there, having conversations, sitting and listening, or occupying myself with some drawing or writing project, daydreaming at the end of some couch. I was a child who grew up in a shared house of artists in the Little Italy neighbourhood of Toronto. My mom's non-traditional parenting of me could be understood as an effect of the totality of art within which she was then living, and the openness of this culture.

After my parent's separation, I lived with my mother half the week in this shared housing until I was 12. We had three rooms on the second floor of the painter and Ontario College of Art instructor Tom Hodgson and his wife Cathy's house on Shaw Street in inner city Toronto. Tom had been one of the "Painters Eleven," a group of Canadian painters who brought abstraction to modern painting in Toronto in the mid-1950's. The Painters Eleven were as much about shaking up the art establishment in its ways of life as about new painting techniques. We lived with Tom in his post-OCA teaching years, where he had been one of my mother's instructors there. My mom was by then working on her MFA. I just really knew Tom as a person, I didn't have an objective perspective of his art practice. I would say now that he was a great free spirit, easy for me to talk with as

a child and always very energetic. He was also a runner and athlete, an exemplar of life, art, and creativity. He had an appreciation of the 'female nude' and what might be called *eros* in daily living; his downtown art studio was famous for its all-night artist parties.

The Shaw Street house had an overgrown, weed-full, you-couldn't-really-call-it-a-lawn out front. Tom had redone the old brick through sand blasting and purple paint on the trim. On either side, Italian neighbours re-did their brick by covering the old with faux-brick, and adding fancy work of wrought iron fences. Tom had installed a sauna, rudimentary-like in the unfinished concrete basement, and built a small swimming pool half into the kitchen and half into the back yard. This was dug out from both, and covered with solar panels to trap heat. Nothing was made with a puritanical designer's hand, but all built by Tom himself. Things had the feel of organic assemblage, the pool made by concrete plaster smoothed by hand into curved ledges, no sharp edges. It was freezing cold to get into in winter. I made the most use of it then and other times, other than naked adult swimmers who jumped into it after emerging from the sauna during gatherings or parties at the house. It was the first time I saw how a penis actually floats, if a man was just standing there in the water. Needless to say the Shaw Street house stuck out within the context of the neighbourhood, and was never visited by my Irish grandparents. It was, I suppose, ahead of its time in restorative renovations, organic building and gardening strategies. For my mom and I, it was a hub, our home for this time of our lives. This house and its creative renovations were a metaphor for the liveliness and re-constructions of the people inside.

I would hang around Tom's back studio and storage area on Sunday afternoons, making my own assemblages with cast off wood scraps from the two-by-fours of his painting frames. It was a place I loved to explore. His large, 4 x 6 ft paintings lay around the coach house studio, stacked to the side, or propped up in different phases of completion. My favourite painting of his was the huge one hanging in the shared kitchen, a profile of his adult daughter Lise, her beautiful face outlined, soft colours, worked through brush strokes, washes of paint and lines, filling the giant square field towards abstraction.

I was a child who learned early to wear a sense of independence while riding the subway by myself by age 10, moving between homes and parents. I grew up quickly listening to and living my mother's relationships with men, a source of activity and tension in her life. Though I know my mom was engaged in art making, I was not often with her on trips to her graduate school studios. She had a drawing, mixed media and conceptual art practice. It was weekends and evenings that we shared time in our three rooms on the middle floor of Tom's house. Two were our bedrooms, and one was my mother's office. We often ate meals in her bedroom cum living area. I would watch Friday night TV there, always *Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island*. She often went to her office to sit at the desk, head bent over, thinking or lost in contemplation.

We spent our time in the neighbourhood on weekends, going to the corner Italian café for Sicilian ice cream. We shopped for food, ate out in Chinatown, and took city walks to other neighbourhoods, or visited the fabric shops on College Street. My mom was often sewing something: bags, clothes, coats. Always people came through the house, coming and going, or we went out to see people, to art events and parties. The sociability of this time was a constant compared to other times in our lives after these years. Yet in all of this movement, my sense of our rooms was central, a close, engaged

space. I loved the window of my room which looked out to the backyard from a side edge of the house. Waking up in the mornings, I would lie in bed and stare at the moulding details of its wooden frame and corners, this view to the outside that was an inside in itself.

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Viewing the art work in *WACK!* I could feel the warm curious presence of this child that was myself, her active imagination and love for the world in the firm soaking of paint on the surfaces of wrapped ladder-like objects, the way paint drips were okay to drip and canvas was wrapped, over and over in strips around the boards (Harmony Hammond, *Hunkertime*, 1979-80). I could feel my mom's creative impulse and her anarchistic way of nurturing me through thought and freedom in this way of making things, making art. She was often distracted, or irritated, and needed to be left alone, not the kind of mom who would show up at my elementary school events or fuss over what was for dinner on weeknights. She expected me to *just be* intelligent, to be able to follow her around when needed. I learned to occupy myself, an impulse I followed and seem to continue to. I spent a lot of time in my room making things such as cloth dolls, learning to sew by hand early and later by machine, trying to imitate the lettered and painted quilts by Joyce Weiland that I loved to look at hanging in the Art Gallery of Ontario on our trips there. I also made films and little animations, clicking frame by frame through cut out scraps of paper and drawings, and I learned to use the darkroom at age 12. I made and made and made, filling the time around me.



This primal education from my mother's 'lap' came back to me in the *WACK!* show in swoops of enlightenment. Cumulative moments of seeing/realizing all this, painful in its deep nostalgia, yet telling in the chaotic, offbeat aesthetics of my lineage, the creative and destructive sides of this. This straining towards freedom, and liberation from social convention that was going on for women and in which I *still attempt to move*.

If it is true that my mother's life lay groundwork for my own, it is also true that I have taken up 'feminism' in ways she did not herself imagine. My mother expected me to

pursue higher education, in any field I chose. Though educated and influenced by male art teachers such as Tom, living the then timely dearth of women professors, she had unhinged her life from orthodoxy, living a generation and education gap in relation to her own parents. As in Irigaray's vertical passage of female subjectivity through mother-daughter genealogy, I followed her example. I follow my vocations as callings, throwing my life to the wind it seems in my own pursuit of the arts, re-claiming women's ways of birthing, and 'spirituality'. Without naming this as such, I sought from an early age to live life from some core of wholeness within myself, wanting to navigate from this, to both live within and push beyond my circumstances, with always an eye to the female source of life. This source seemed somehow hidden from full view within the culture around me, was not readily apparent, though was often commented on by my mother in such things as her feminist analyses of movies we would watch, or her noting the dominance of men in the field of art. Luce Irigaray writes that "a female god is yet to come" (1993, p. 67), that the "divinity of women is still hidden, veiled" (p. 71).

I leaned towards this hidden female, in the centrality of my mother's vibrant and troubled energies, or the mix of complacency and strength in my grandmothers' lives, both of whom lived in life-long marriages, devoted to singular husbands and homes. This female becoming and un-becoming became of utmost interest to me in possibilities for my own living. The spiritual implications of which began to occupy my own yearnings, time and energy, and are now the focus of my research and writing.

In my mother's original copy of Susan Sontag's 1966 book, *Against Interpretation*, Sontag calls for an *erotics of art*, deploring the practice of art interpretation that "amounts to a philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone" (p 8). Sontag wonders what kind of criticism can "serve a work of art and not usurp its place" (p. 12). As if anticipating the explosion of creative impulse to emerge in the decade following her essay, the arrival of the "post-modern" with the civil rights and women's rights movements, Sontag asks for *transparency* as the most liberating value in art. She calls for acts of art criticism that deliver an "accurate, loving description of the appearance of a work of art" (p. 13). She wanted us to "*recover* our senses. We must learn to hear more, see more, to *feel* more" (p.14), in an age already too depleted from such sensual capabilities.

The women artists of *WACK!* surely arouse this sensuous, feeling experience of ourselves through art and exposure of their naked selves. The artists were at play with the censor of women's bodies and stories, a patriarchal censor who blocked a 'naked' truth of lives both from within and without. Nakedness was perhaps a trope for more poignant social and spiritual freedoms, re-framing gender and sexuality from women's perspectives. Living with my mother through these times opened doors for my own sensual and sensate knowing of the world around me, a kind of trust in one's own experiences that can be hard to describe, but was cultivated in the ways free thinking, living and art making were encouraged or just expected as status quo. This trust is alive within me in a way that did not cause me to worry about exposing my daughters to the nakedness in *WACK!* though women's nakedness was a cause of concern to the theatre teacher and other mothers I spoke with. I didn't see that this work was done with shock value, or to exploit in anyway. A particular sensibility and expression was at work that I recognized and could resonate with, a visual, sensory education by women for women and the world beyond such categories of gender. The work has to be experienced, the work is about *direct experience*. This is where the discernment of education comes into

play. How can we learn to trust our experience and knowing, and even know what this means across contexts of lives?



As I stood in the Vancouver Art Gallery, in front of Carolle Schneeman's film *Fuse* (1965-7), I watched how this film's surface was intentionally scratched, as if left lying around her apartment, images of her bedroom window glowed with soft morning light, images of her male partner/lover driving, and images of her cat lying on the bed, all these images spliced between images of kissing, her partner's penis, brief scenes of further love making as he rhythmically moves between her legs, each shot is an instance of gathered meaning, an ode to love, its making and intimate rituals. I had read about how this film was censored at the time it was made. Here now, people strolled casually by me in the gallery space as I sat in front of the TV monitor. They seemed oblivious to the content of what I was viewing, the scratch-like quality, and flashing of cats and windows and driving and snow and a beach, diffusing and yet at one with its intimate sexual content, representing a connecting fluidity of eros within daily life. And suddenly I became aware of two realities, a dividing line, and fear gripped my upper belly in a knot and I felt I could not breathe. I could not stand to know the deeper meaning of this piece while people strolled so casually by.

My anxiety caused me to leave the gallery. I had to focus on my breath, one breath at a time, walking decidedly but slowly down the gallery stairs, as if in a dream, a bad dream. And then I knew what I had felt throughout this whole show, and all of its previous weeks. I realized how a community of women, of artists, of which I am an heir and accomplice, were and are generating a *collective* impulse of awakening, through race, class and sexual differences, beyond the forces of a society that promotes the ranking of individual artists over such collective powers of art. I felt that this collective awakening was releasing what can be understood in women's spirituality as human *realization* or *kundalini*, the distinct energy which I was feeling surge through my own body/self at that moment. This is a spiritual life-force energy, the kind that pulses through the earth and makes us what we are though we might deny its real source in economic terms, ever drawing from its vitality and sustenance. I felt then that the art was a trigger for incredible female-based energetic release if one could sense it this way, an opening *into life*.

I wondered if any one had written a catalogue essay describing this work, beyond its stereotype-shattering impulses, as a collective impulse of *energetic* or *spiritual awakening*? Elinor Gadon, feminist art historian and scholarly instigator of the Women's

Spirituality degree program from which I graduated, brings this idea forward in her analysis of feminist artists of the time as re-inscribing connections to the female body, sexuality, lost female iconography and repressed or lost Goddesses (1989). Gadon maintained that investigation of art, both ancient and modern, and art making practices be at the core of the Women's Spirituality degree curriculum. She writes of the artist as "prophet" where "the arts always hold the promise of enriching our ways of seeing and being in the world" (p. 309). She notes how women artists of the 1970's created a new visual language, having to move beyond a male-dominated art world. "Woman is everywhere present as a mediating symbol for the male but almost completely absent as an expression of female experience" (p. 310). What was true for the 1970's is still disarmingly so now as my daughters face the continuing barrage of popular culture, and the objectification of female bodies in media and advertising.

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In my experience of *WACK!* the "new visual language" that Gadon notes awakens something asleep within the culture, something that had been long repressed, a spiritual life force energy, residing within the earth, within women themselves - an *erotics of art*. An erotics that serves a function of awakening, of the kind of direct sensual experience Sontag was calling for. Thus, the collective energy of the art in *WACK!* was having its way with me in this moment of potent feeling and anxiety. The surges of distinct sexual and life energy I felt walking through the gallery in past visits, the visual and naked stimulus of so much women's revolutionary art, in teasing, self-aware ways made light of by the cover of the catalogue displaying a pornographic-like collection of smiling naked women (Martha Rosler, *Body Beautiful, or Harem*, 1966-72), now came to me in one moment of knowing.

This time and place was indeed a scrapping away of false layers shovelled onto women's bodies and selves to find real, felt bodies and 'selves'. The artists call towards an undefiled, in-corruptible, yet sexual female, one who walks without fear of violence and shame, calling to the potent present and "future of a loving and nurturing social order" that depends on such embodied and spiritual *freedom* of women (Chopra, 2007, p. 167). In that flash I found myself occupying two 'spaces', both the liberated and the mundane, and I couldn't stand to know and experience both at once. Art had become real, life was the dream.

In experiencing this dream of freedom, I recognize myself as a female initiate of such practices and art-full prayers. In the long years of my mother's cultivations and my own search, art practices and art-full re-search in women's spirituality, I would tend this desire for freedom as a wisdom seeker on a path grounded in fleshy and divine female beings, a path that could not have been forged without movements of feminism and women's art making alongside and before me. I want my daughters' lives to be enriched by such education, its vertical and horizontal dimensions.

I belong to the mother, and I belong to art – I am Hers in ways I barely discern with this text.



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