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## MANTRA AS MEDIUM: CULTIVATING NECESSARY WISDOM IN AESTHETIC INQUIRY

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**Abstract:** My quest for necessary wisdom about mothering, teaching, researching—coalescing here as art *and* research—comes by way of a mantra enacted between mother and daughter onto the world: *milk, heat, time*. An awareness of mantra as methodologically potent occurred through the artistic practice of drawing with mother's milk, heat, and time. Traveling through the twists and overlaps of my complicated existence as a mother, artist, teacher, and researcher this paper offers three imaginable potencies for arts-based research: mantra unfolds myth, mantra intensifies listening, and mantra generates reciprocity. This contemplatively and performatively crafted text brings to light these three potencies through multiple modes of data-creation: mantra, time, drawing, sensation, song, memory, connection, affect, photographs, writing, and materiality. Linger with me in the place where unconsumed mother's milk—fat and water separating in plastic sleeves and bound for the trash in a university childcare setting—coalesced with cultural myths of breastfeeding, embodied memories of labor and

returning to work after childbirth, grassy-scented infant's breath, lullabies, milk scorching on a hot iron, cotton clothing, silver salts embedded in light-sensitive paper, and more. Linger and listen—*water, bodies, stories, hidden, unhidden*.

**Keywords:** arts-based research; embodied inquiry; feminist inquiry; aesthetic inquiry; Slow ontology

## Opening

*mantra,  
utterance  
spoken, painted, performed—  
again  
and again  
focusing, energizing*

*born of sound, drawing  
vibration  
hymn  
syllable  
touch  
memory, throat, air*

*listen...*

*milk, heat, time.*

**Figure 1**

*Let Me Carry You*



*Note.* Wheatgrass and cotton with iris, Hofsess (2013), photograph courtesy of the author.

As a visual artist, I was making work about my unmet desire to become a mother for years before my daughter arrived (see Figure 1). Many of my artworks during those years featured mutations of a repeated symbol, a garment of clothing—the slip. After becoming a mother, the slip relinquished my creative attention and desire, opening me to making something else, something new. I began experimenting with other materials and marks. I started drawing repeated patterns of tiny hatch marks. I added variations and elements—discarded breastmilk, exposure to heat, durations of time. Drawing the same marks repeatedly and slowly attuned me towards spiritual and embodied wisdom related to the daily repetition of my experiences with mothering. For example, nursing my daughter every few hours of every day brought to bear the feeling of a mantra—an echoing, sacred gesture. My aim for this paper is to explore the potential of mantra as a possibility that opens spaces for knowing differently—by bringing the aesthetic, the spiritual, and the reciprocal to bear on inquiry. In what follows, you will encounter artworks, memories, photographs, and sensations drawn from the first three years of my

daughter's life. Across that time, I stayed in the discomfort and unknowing of aesthetic inquiry by writing, thinking, and feeling with a provocation from filmmaker/theorist Trinh Minh-Ha (1999) who declared: "Women must write through their bodies... We write—think and feel—(with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts" (p. 258).

In this paper, I write directly to you—a reader—through my embodied art/ research practices in the first few years of my daughter's life. I did not set out to study becoming a mother or breastfeeding within the academy. What is more accurate to say is that my way of being in the world as a mother, artist, teacher, and researcher opened contemplative spaces of consideration. These spaces became fields of (re)visiting, (re)writing, and (re)making what it was for me to birth and nurture a daughter in her early years, and (re)told through *scholartistry* (Nielsen, 1998). My journey threads into polyvocal conversations about mothering, and ripples out towards wider social, cultural, and political issues tied to breastfeeding. I enhance the tension of such weaving by shifting the tone of my writing and images in undulating rhythms throughout the text. Therefore, at times, my writing leans towards the poetic, and at others, it reads more informatively. The images create further tension by offering visual and sensory readings of my encounters.

Even though I cannot name exactly when this writing began, I can say that it was in the summer of 2018 that I began formally gathering together the images and words that follow this introduction. For that was the time when Kakali Bhattacharya, Barbara Bickel, Anne Harris, Celeste Snowber, and I began to envision a collaborative panel on "necessary wisdom" for the "Spirituality and Education" Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association annual meeting. Their scholarship individually, and our work envisioning the panel together, stayed with me in the crafting of my presentation, and eventually became the paper you now read. While each of us took up the concept of "necessary wisdom" differently, this provocation found me dwelling with plant ecologist Robin Kimmerer's (2013) question—"How, in our modern world, can we find our way... to make our relations with the world sacred again?" (p. 31). My interest in spirituality and education landed where "it gets murky, the spiritual and the pragmatic bumping heads" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 90); The place where unconsumed mother's milk—fat and water separating in plastic sleeves and bound for the trash in a university childcare setting—coalesced with cultural myths of breastfeeding, embodied memories of labor and returning to work after childbirth, grassy-scented infant's breath, lullabies, milk scorching on a hot iron, cotton clothing, silver salts embedded in light-sensitive paper (see Figures 2 and 3), and more.

As Bickel and Hugill (2011) explored, the composition of art, spirituality, education, and inquiry are not without risk—for "(i)n this co-encounter the artist opens

herself up to a vulnerability that holds the risk of exposure to others that may not understand or be tolerant of differences” (p. 9). Therefore, I pause here to echo the wisdom of Bhattacharya & Payne (2016), who wrote bravely in the generative vulnerability and discomfort that arises when our intimate narratives become woven outside of ourselves through contemplative, arts-based approaches to inquiry. Bhattacharya and Payne (2016) affirmed that “(w)hile such storytelling can be informative and illuminating, [they] remain mindful of the temptation to glamorize unity. For narratives also expose what we do not share, highlighting difference and unfamiliarity and inviting us to sit with these experiences” (p. 1101). And so, I aim to sit with you in the light of whatever our differences may be.

### **Mantra as Methodologically Potent**

“Water, stories, the body,  
all the things we do, are mediums  
that hide and show what’s hidden.

Study them...”

- Rūmī & Barks, 1995, p. 172

#### **Figure 2**

*Drawing with Mantra*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of Shauna Caldwell.

Broadly speaking, in the Hindu tradition, mantras accompany rituals honoring peak moments and rites of passages (Easwaran, 2008). There is not a singular understanding or definition of mantra, and, as Harvey Alper (1989) explored, “(a)s a tool of human intentionality, mantras are protean. They are used in an astonishing variety of contexts, for a plethora of purposes, with a multitude of informing emotions, and by the widest variety of individuals” (p. 6). Elements of mantra that my paper metaphorically and aesthetically explores are 1) the contemplative focus that repetition of a mantra offers, and 2) the use of mantra to cultivate a spiritual attention through everyday gestures. I explore these elements as methodological potencies as I repeatedly gather my focus through the aesthetic mantra—*milk, heat, time*.

As I wade into the story ahead, my intention is to proceed gently and respectfully through mantra, which brings a rich and complex lineage of its own to this work. While it has been expansive to think and write through mantra as a metonymy, I feel compelled to acknowledge my potentially complicated engagement with mantra as a White, Western woman working in the heteropatriarchal academy. I hope my evocation of this metaphor demonstrates gratitude for the contemplative scope of mantra and its capacity to slow my questions, and my capacity to listen, down.

This inquiry traveled through the twists and overlaps of my complicated existence as a mother, artist, teacher, and researcher. For this reason, I was drawn to evoke scholars working across multiple traditions and media. Therefore, I called upon: *connective aesthetics* conceptualized by painter and art critic, Suzi Gablik (1992); *contemplative and arts-based journeying* created by qualitative methodologist and artist Kakali Bhattacharya (2015; 2018); *Slow ontology* embraced by choreographer and post qualitative methodologist, Jasmine Ulmer (2017); and *embodied inquiry* poeticized by dancer and art educator, Celeste Snowber (2016). This theoretical gathering of women became expanded by the spiritual musings of potter and poet, M. C. Richards (1996), biologist and storyteller, Robin Kimmerer (2013), and 13th-century poet, scholar, teacher, and mystic, Jelaluddin Rūmī (see Rūmī & Barks, 1995). Working through these perspectives, and my own creative practice, opened three imaginable potencies: 1) mantra unfolds myth, 2) mantra intensifies listening, 3) mantra generates reciprocity.

In what follows, this contemplatively and performatively crafted text (see Bhattacharya, 2018; Powell, 2015) brings to light these potencies by repeating the aesthetic mantra *milk, heat, time*. Each time the mantra repeats, it moves differently through multiple modes of data-creation (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008), including time, drawing, sensation, song, memory, connection, affect, photographs, writing, and materiality that all nudge “the boundary that separates aesthetic from mundane experiences” (Grumet, 1988, p. 79). All this said, where does the work of mantra begin? Perhaps much “in the way a sun might be said to ‘start.’ That is, it ‘starts’

by shining out in all directions. It will touch all the rest of what we say, just as the Sun touches the Earth everywhere” (Richards & Haynes, 1996, p. 82).

*Water, bodies, stories, hidden, unhidden.*

### Mantra Unfolds Myth

“But don’t be satisfied with stories, how things  
have gone with others. Unfold  
your own myth, without complicated explanation,  
so everyone will understand the passage,  
*We have opened you.*”

- Rūmī & Barks, 1995, p. 41 (emphasis in original)

**Figure 3**

*Lumen with Lace Soaked in Mother's Milk*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of the author.

Feminist art historian and printmaker Rachel Epp Buller (2016), whose work explores motherhood and the maternal body in contemporary art, noted,

For artists interested in engaging with spectacles around maternity, and specifically around breastfeeding, the United States has offered a gold mine of recent contextual grounding. In U.S. media coverage over the last several years, national headlines have reported on discrimination and censorship of the lactating body on a monthly, if not weekly, basis. Breastfeeding mothers have been denied their legal rights in workplaces, restaurants, health clubs, airplanes, swimming pools, retail stores, and courtrooms. While 49 of the 50 United States now have laws that specifically protect the act of breastfeeding in public, the vast majority have no enforcement provisions, meaning that breastfeeding mothers may have little legal recourse when their actions are illegally censored. Popular magazines and newspapers report on such incidents, embracing and exacerbating the polarizing dynamic around breastfeeding and, on occasion, even manufacturing their own controversies around the lactating body. (p. 2)

Buller's analysis evoked pained resonance. For some time, I sat in the quiet with the question, "How do we listen to the parts of our bodies which don't often have voice in our culture?" (Snowber, 2016, p. 65). Breathing in and through her concern, I wondered—What would it mean to listen to mother's milk by way of mantra? These two questions led to me to write through how I encountered and stumbled into encumbrance and myths of breastfeeding. Further, I explore how my sensing and experimenting with the materiality of mother's milk, and moving through mantra as a possible medium, evoked aesthetic, phenomenological, autobiographical, and embodied modes of inquiring (see Figure 4).



## Milk

**Figure 4**

*Performing a Mantra*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of Shauna Caldwell.

Perched on a plastic chair in the educational classroom of our local hospital, the lactation consultant warns, "if you had trouble getting pregnant, don't be surprised if you have trouble with your milk supply." Considering I had a whole load of trouble between me and pregnancy, the anticipation I feel about meeting my unborn child struggles with yet another embodied myth.

Ninety-three miles away, a mother was removed from a court of law for breastfeeding. The judge censured her, and threatened to hold her in contempt,

"Ma'am you need to cover up. For you not to realize that is absolutely ridiculous."

"Step outside, and cover up right now. Stand up, and go."

"... to nurse the child in the courtroom is just absolutely inappropriate. Step outside and button up."

All this despite her rights as protected by North Carolina Law 14-190.9(b):

Notwithstanding any other provision of law, a woman may breast feed in any public or private locations where she is otherwise authorized to be, irrespective of whether the nipple of the mother's breast is uncovered during or incidental to the breast feeding. (North Carolina Breastfeeding Coalition, 2017)

Yet, this mother's story washed away with the news cycle, dissolving and shapeshifting into a storm of multiple, familiar stories. To offer another example of breast-feeding controversy in more recent news, the 2018 U.S. delegation to the United Nations-affiliated World Health Assembly unexpectedly agitated deliberations in support of encouraging breast-feeding and limiting inaccurate advertising of breastmilk substitutes—promoting instead the interests of infant formula manufacturers (Jacobs, 2018).

Breastmilk is 88 percent water. This water becomes a carrier for fat, protein, lactose, and other vitamins and minerals. Much like its physical properties, breastmilk becomes more than a messenger between mothers and babes—it is a carrier of unfolding myths. Personal and cultural narratives of breastfeeding, like the body from which it arrives, have become "colonized, gendered, politicized, medicalized, and consumerized" (Snowber, 2016, p. xiii) across time and place. Breastmilk is consumed, measured, pumped, dried up, coaxed, expressed, coveted, frozen, championed, legislated. Breastmilk is never neutral, and as a material, it is inevitably bound to the acts of mothering and breastfeeding (Joyce, 2015).

## Heat

**Figure 5**

Mother, Daughter, Birth, Greeting



*Note.* Photo courtesy of author.

My labor expands with a bang, the pop of my amniotic sac being broken as hot water pours. The heat and contractions take me by surprise and somehow connect me more deeply to the experience of the baby I am about to meet (see Figure 5). For just a moment I am flooded by her warm, watery world.

After the birth, I cannot sit or stand in response to my daughter's cries without help. I sing to her softly in a window flooded by winter sun, her coppery hair catching the light and the sound of sucking igniting my expanding heart (see Figure 6).

## Time

**Figure 6**

*Mother, Daughter, Time, Milk, Sun*



*Note.* Photograph courtesy of author.

I read an Op-ed in the paper this morning. A mother writes about losing her son on the first day she put him in the care of someone else. He died sleeping in an unfamiliar crib. There is a mystic alchemy at play as I read her story. In much the same way that the scent of a carnation places me up against a moment I never lived, have only glimpsed through an image of my mother and a bouquet on her wedding day. This woman's story confronts a deep ache in my body—a mark of the sorrow I have felt in turning my daughter over each morning into someone else's arms, the pain that comes from placing your trust in another, the pain of moving ahead against your will. "Our culture demanded it," she wrote (Scorah, 2015, para 20).

My breasts ache and leak into cotton liners as I usher the last student outside and lock the classroom door behind her. Calling up images of my baby on a phone screen helps my milk begin to let down. I am lost in the sensations of compression and release as I hear the lock turn over the steady suck of my breast pump. Three men enter the space having been sent to check an air duct. Their collective gaze positions

me as the intruder. Later I am told to utilize the bathroom to pump. A room with no functioning electrical outlets:

The Affordable Care Act also mandates that employers are required to provide reasonable break time for an employee to express breast milk for her nursing child for one year after the child's birth each time such employee has need to express milk. The employer is not required to compensate an employee receiving reasonable break time for any work time spent for such purpose. The employer must also provide a place, other than a bathroom, for the employee to express breast milk. (North Carolina Breastfeeding Coalition, 2017, para 2)

Nursing mothers have rights that are rarely upheld, and

All of this... is part of a broader problem in the U.S.: our tendency to treat broad social issues as though they're just a matter of personal responsibility, which a little bootstrapping can fix, and as though continued lack of access to adequate and affordable health care, day care and maternity leave can be ignored as long as women breastfeed. Mothers bear a lot, but they shouldn't have to bear this. (Joyce, 2015, para 16).

While it brings me no comfort that these encumbrances and myths are shared among mothers of varying circumstances, it does enliven in me an attention to the work of Suzi Gablik (1992), for whom rethinking artmaking through connective aesthetics "affirms our radical relatedness" (p. 2) and displaces the independent, autonomous artist in light of an "ecological world view" (p. 4). Her work activated my desire to "revise the cultural myths that are guiding us" (Gablik, 1992, p. 3) as artist transitioning into motherhood through a body thrust onto the world threaded through with myth. Given that "(c)ultural myths... do not die easily, especially when our personal commitment to them is so strong that it is difficult even to entertain different premises" (Gablik, 1992, p. 2)—what could the work of an aesthetic mantra unsettle?

*Water, bodies, stories, hidden, unhidden; milk, heat, time.*

## Mantra Intensifies Listening

“Listen to the presences inside poems,  
Let them take you where they will.  
Follow those private hints,  
and never leave the premises.”

- Rūmī & Barks, 1995, p. 99

### Figure 7

*Stack of Slow Drawings*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of Shauna Caldwell.

For me, mantras often recall poems in their cadence, focus, and carefully distilled wisdom. Inspired again by Rūmī, I wonder about how to listen the presences inside aesthetic practices that embody mantra. Here, I explore my initial artmaking encounters with aesthetic mantra—the process of making handmade paper on which to draw with mother’s milk, heat, and time. My paintbrush, swollen with mother’s milk, counted fleeting moments and movements much like a mantra repeated, whispered, walked.

Working in this way opened me to “the possibilities of Slowness” (Ulmer, 2017, p. 201). For Ulmer (2017), “Slow (with a capital S) refers to a state of being in which

scholars choose to live writing and research through locality, materiality, and artisan craft” (p. 201). My inquiry through mantra was Slow in that it was located in the rhythms of a lactating body, in the materiality of mother’s milk, in the craft of water and cotton pulp transformed into handmade paper (see Figure 7).

Slow down to pump.

Settle down with the baby to nurse.

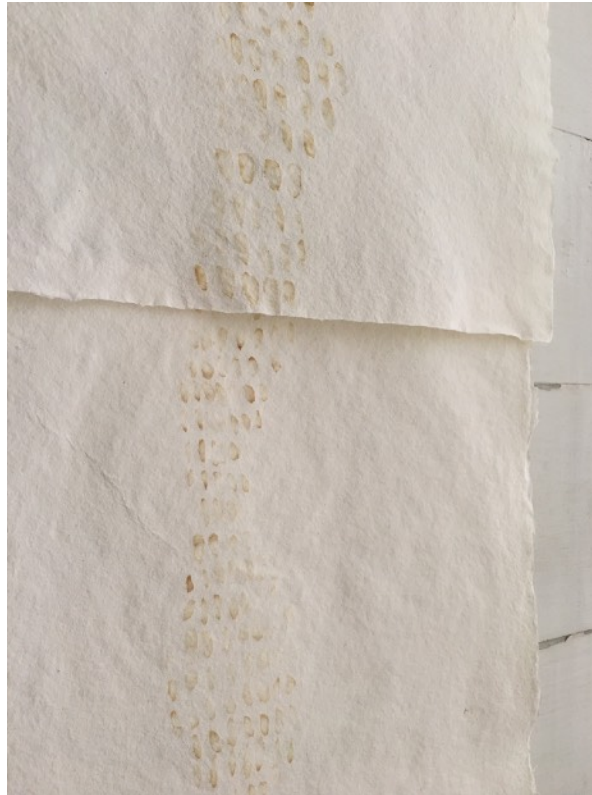
Wait for pressed pulp to dry in the damp afternoon air.

*Together, apart, nurse, pump, trust, release, hidden, unhidden.*

## Milk

**Figure 8**

Mother's Milk, Heat, Time, Cotton



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of Shauna Caldwell.

As Snowber (2016) witnessed, “(w)isdom lies here waiting for us to pay attention” (p. 56). Returning to work full-time pushed breastmilk to the forefront of my daily focus. My baby wouldn’t take a bottle of pumped milk at school, and she couldn’t relax enough to nurse if the classroom had any amount of activity or noise going on. Alert to the life

and vibrancy of learning—she eschewed her nourishment, craning her neck at every sensation, sound, movement in the midst. Although I sent frozen bags of breastmilk each morning, most of the liquid went unconsumed. Like the transition to motherhood itself, breastfeeding while working full-time became a source of confusion, joy, vulnerability, and expansion. I wondered what I could create with and learn from this milk, this discarded part of my body. I did what I often do when I feel lost—I opened my journal and began writing, drawing, and contemplating as a means of paying attention.

As feminist theorist Madeleine Grumet (1988) declared, “to adopt the stance of the artist is to challenge the taken-for-granted values and culture that one share with others” (p. 81). Rather than simply throwing away the expired milk, I sought new “maternal territory” (Buller, 2016, p. 2) in my creative practices of papermaking and photography. Practices that metaphorically resembled mantra and offered new ways of listening to the cultural myths surrounding mothering and breastfeeding (see Figure 8).

## Heat

**Figure 9**

*Mother's Milk, Heat, Time, Cotton,  
Thermometer, Farmhouse*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of Shauna Caldwell.

I first pulled multiple sheets of handmade cotton paper on which I would later draw. I chose cotton as it reminded me of the cloth fabrics that my daughter was



swaddled in most of her days. Realizing that mother's milk required more organic phenomena to make an image lasting beyond the ephemeral, I began experimenting with scorching the milk into the paper. My mark-making technique acted on me much like an aesthetic mantra in the way that the breastmilk behaved. Spread too thin or too long, the liquid absorbed into the paper leaving no trace, even when heated. Listening to milk by way of mantra meant focusing and responding in slow, meditative strokes and utterances.

Applying heat with the same iron used to press clothes for work, I learned to wait for just the right moment between too wet and too dry. Trusting and holding the iron steady for quite some time until, finally, milk scorched handmade paper and glittering, golden hatch marks appear from seemingly nowhere (see Figure 9). Really, it was listening to the smell of the milk reaching a certain temperature that cued me to the exact timing.

## Time

**Figure 10**

*Mother's Milk, Heat, Time, Cotton, Clock, Farmhouse*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of Shauna Caldwell.

My drawings and I lingered in a late-nineteenth farmhouse, the dampness and rot whispering the story of how earth, air, and water are slowly and steadily consuming this home (see Figures 9, 10, and 11). My body moved care-fully (Bickel, personal communication) with my drawings on handmade paper, the earth and farmland firmly underfoot. Yet these presences drift away—as I go off chasing memories of my labor—a cesarean section undergone years and miles away.

My body is thrown by memory to a different time and place, to a time when

I have never been so aware of my body.

A body laboring chanting rushing

hours ticked across a hospital clock.

A body becoming through the threshold of motherhood

welcomed with a deep and straight belly cut.

A body weakened by its own need for healing

while streams of golden milk rush to meet my daughter's anxious suck.

A body making sense, giving grace

for how far we have come since families lost two loves in

one fell

swoop.

A body swallowing expectation and pride

as the night nurse says to me "always the ones with a natural birth plan that end up getting a section... now, isn't that just something?"

A body knowing that if this house had been mine two hundred years ago,

My story and my daughter might have ceased here.

*Water, bodies, stories, hidden, unhidden.*

## Mantra Generates Reciprocity

“(C)onnective aesthetics recognizes that we live in a time in which our need for community has become critical.”

- Gablik, 1992, p. 6

**Figure 11**

*Milk, Heat, Time*



*Note.* Performance Still Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of Shauna Caldwell.

A few years ago, mother and artist Leigh Pennebaker (2017) created an Instagram feed, *Breastfeeding Art*. Through her feed, she curates the myriad expressions of lactating women across the span of art history into the present moment. A scroll through her feed is a journey through religious iconography of Madonna and Isis, socially-engaged interventions that explore the maternal, lactating body, as well as candid photographs of families in the midst of breastfeeding. For me, Pennebaker’s curation recalls Gablik’s (1992) connective aesthetics, which claims a pressing need for connection and community rising up through a feminist logic. Hashtags, “brelfies” (see, Beach, 2017), and other social media uprising speak to “a real yearning for a sense of

community and intimacy” (Gablik, 1992, p. 3) that contemporary art practice alone cannot yield. This uprising has rippled through the academy as women turn to social media as a means of collectively inquiring (see, Wilson, Shields, Guyotte, & Hofsess, 2016; Guyotte, Hofsess, Shields, & Wilson, 2018).

## Milk

**Figure 12**

*Mother, Daughter, Milk, Time*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of the author.

I have well passed through the one-year North Carolina law which affords women the right to pump while on the job. While I pump from the car, or in the darkened observation room of my daughter’s school, I often wonder about the wisdom of allowing the state to determine the length of a breastfeeding relationship. My daughter is delighted when she can glean a “little sip,” and I cherish the way we hold each other through our eyes (see Figure 12). “You’re still nursing?” isn’t really a question as much a judgment put upon my body and my way of being in the world. It is as simple and as complex as that.

My window to bear milk closes as my daughter celebrates her second birthday, and I don’t want to own that truth. I find myself increasingly burning and bitter about university housing provided for faculty traveling out of state with students that will not allow professors to bring their children—even if breastfeeding. My multiple appeals all

denied, I travel without my daughter but with resentment and an unnecessary breast pump. Without her near, my body refuses to produce any milk.

And so I continue my quest for necessary wisdom as sure as

(w)e are born from deep within (life's) mystery; we know all about it somewhere in our blood and in our bones. Our heads may feel baffled, but our human wisdom surfaces again and again... Deep life-wisdoms sustain us all, all the while we are wringing our hands. (Richards & Haynes, 1996, p. 90-91)

## Heat

**Figure 13**

*Lumen with Milk, Clothing, Rosemary*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of the author.

I traded my iron for the heat of the sun when I explored mantra through alternative photography (see Figures 3, 13, 14, and 18). It was through my student, Shauna Caldwell—a rising folklorist and artist—that I learned about lumen prints. Alternative photographic processes produce images without a camera. Making a lumen is a fairly simple process where organic objects are composed on the surface of unexposed photo paper and bathed in sunlight (Enfield, 2013). Early photographer, William Henry Fox Talbot conceptualized these kinds of early photogram technologies as photogenic drawings. Because I was drawn to the idea of making drawings about the transition to motherhood and the complexities of breastfeeding beyond traditional forms of representation, I begin to wonder what the mantra of *milk, heat, time* might produce through the lumen process. Shauna was familiar with my project after documenting my early performances of *Milk, Heat, Time* (see Figures 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11), and she graciously offered to share her knowledge with me on a weekend afternoon.

## Time

**Figure 14**

*Lumening*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of the author.

In the space between our conversation, you might have heard scissors mashing through an outgrown cotton onesie or the happy sounds of my daughter playing near us as a series of lumens emerged. I experimented with smearing the breastmilk directly on the paper, coating plant and fiber material with the liquid before sandwiching everything between the photo paper and glass printing frame. Rosemary for remembrance and outgrown clothing marked the passing of time—all that I was learning about mothering, teaching, researching, living. I cannot help but think about our time together as another performance beyond the farmhouse structure, one in which daughters bear witness to how women gather to exchange questions, knowledge, and wondering.

### **The Full Image: Implications for Inquiry**

“We are found in each other’s stories, whether they  
are written, oral, painted or poeticized.”  
- Snowber, 2016, p. xv

My work gathering necessary wisdom is not new. In fact, Freedman and Springgay (2012) affirmed mothering as “the focus of research across disciplines and in popular culture for more than three decades” (p. 3). Yet, I have endeavored to offer a contribution to this robust trajectory by bringing the aesthetic, the spiritual, and the reciprocal to bear in educational research by way of mantra.

At the close of this inquiry, I realized that my wonder about Kimmerer’s (2013) question—“How, in our modern world, can we find our way... to make our relations with the world sacred again?”—invited me to see daily acts of breastfeeding in and out of the academy, Slow processes of making drawings and lumens, feminist collaborations between mothers, daughters, colleagues, and students—all as different variations of working with an aesthetic mantra. These explorations and iterations of mantra, the rich spaces between them, and the (re)making of these forms in the crafting of this text—opened my art/research practices towards spiritual contemplation, wonder, connectivity, and the possibility of cultivating feminist, embodied wisdom in aesthetic inquiry.

I pause here to wonder, what would a methodology or curriculum of mantra evoke in contexts beyond what I have explored here? What might other scholars find generative in exploring their own variations of aesthetic mantra? What else might I stumble upon and learn if I continue to speak, paint, perform with mantra? I open into these questions for all the ways mantra allowed the fullness of my complicated existence as a mother, artist, teacher, and researcher to materialize and make sense. Returning to the words of M. C. Richards and Haynes (1996), my movements through a temporary breastfeeding body reminded me that as “(o)ur perceptions change, our

feelings change, our ways of learning change. So our wholeness contains a lifeline of unfolding inner and outer forms. Education must therefore be sensitive to what is happening *to whom and when*" (p. 83, emphasis in original).

I wish to leave you with one last expression of mantra—a collaborative exchange between me and my daughter. An expression inspired by the "full image" (Richards & Haynes, 1996, p. 80) of learning where the aesthetic practice of mantra becomes generatively enfolded as scholars radically hope and imagine towards the creation of new relations onto the world.

## Milk

**Figure 15**

*Painting Mother's Milk on Photo Paper*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of the author.



My daughter begins to notice the marker strikes across the plastic tubes of discarded milk. "Is this milk for your art, Mama?" she gently questions me. She has other queries too—Will I be nursing the new babies in her multi-age classroom? And, why doesn't almond milk taste as yummy as mama's milk?

## Heat

**Figure 16**

*Lumening*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of the author.

My daughter's wonderings led me to invite her to engage with me in "creating a robust, organic, living methodological practice" (Ulmer, 2017, p. 208). So, while a small amount of breastmilk was shifting from frozen to room temperature, my daughter and I climbed upstairs to my studio to select a few paint brushes. She was largely in her own world as she dipped and danced her brush across the photographic paper (see Figure 15). Although hidden from her play, I was unhidden too—milk, heat, and time all curious partners in the performance unfolding between us. Although hidden from our view, the silver salts and latent image became unhidden too. Many variables affected our image—how long we exposed the paper, the intensity of the sun, the thickness of the milk applied, and the quality of the paper. If the photo paper is new or old, made of fiber or resin, it affects the color changes during the exposure (Enfield, 2013).

## Time

**Figure 17**

*Lumen Made by Thea and Mother's Milk*



*Note.* Photograph courtesy of the author.

The door shuts heavily behind us as she calls out—“Please come back Mr. Golden Sun!” We set up her printing frame in a small, yet light-filled spot on the porch. She activates the slow exposure time by drawing around the printing frame with sidewalk chalk, sweeping pine needles, and blowing bubbles at the sun—which slowly retreats from the treescape known as our backyard. Soft specks of rain began to fall. My daughter breathes and laughs. I breathe and laugh. Tiny specks of coral and pink

breathe into a pool of mothers' milk becoming gray-purple in concert with the early evening light (see Figures 16 and 17).

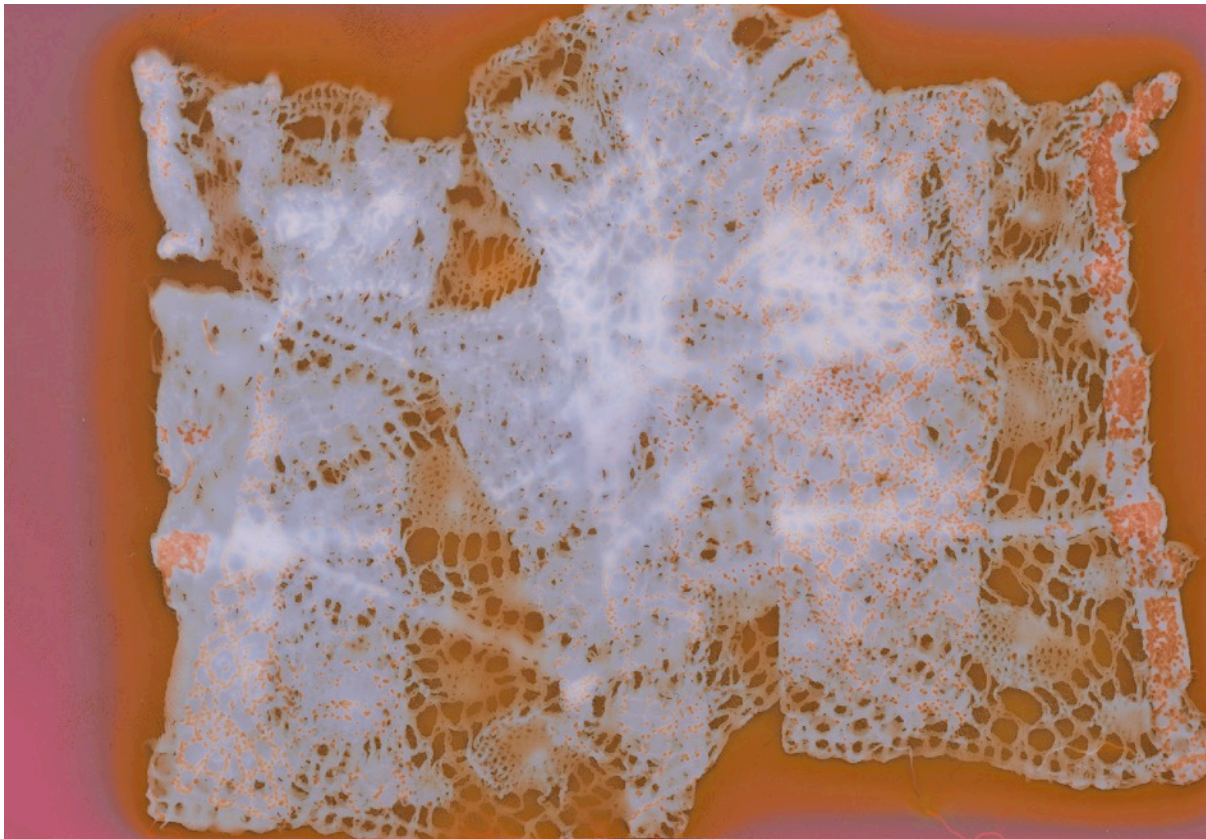
My presence with all of these sensations, drifts into the space of Minh-Ha's (1999) ideas of a woman's writing as "nurturingwriting,"

a 'connoting material', a 'kneading dough', a 'linguistic flesh'. And it draws its corporeal fluidity from images of water—a water from the source, a deep, subterranean water that trickles in the womb, a meandering river, a flow of life, of words running over or slowly dripping down the pages. This keeping-alive and life-giving water exists simultaneously as the writer's ink, the mother's milk... (p. 260)

*Water, bodies, stories, hidden, unhidden; milk, heat, time.*

**Figure 18**

*Lumen with Lace Soaked in Mother's Milk*



*Note.* Hofsess (2018), photograph courtesy of the author.

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