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## A SET OF VILLANELLES IN RESPONSE TO: (RE)BIRTHING THE FEMININE IN ACADEME (EDITED BY LINDA HENDERSON, ALISON L. BLACK AND SUSANNE GARVIS)

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**Abstract / Artist Statement:** In this review of *(Re)birthing the feminine in academe: Creating spaces of motherhood in patriarchal contexts* (2020) edited by L. Henderson, A. L. Black and S. Garvis), I take a poetic-is-personal-is-political approach in the form of a series of villanelles. Villanelle is a highly structured poetic form comprised of five tercets followed by a quatrain, with two repeating rhymes and two refrains. The fixed form of the villanelle is taken in this review to represent the highly structured and strictured institution of the university and yet turned around and made subversive through a creative and critical feminist language of maternity—much like the villanus origins of the word itself.

**Keywords:** villanelle, feminism, maternity, poetry

(Re)birthing the feminine in the academe: Creating spaces of motherhood in patriarchal contexts (2020), edited by Linda Henderson, Alison Black, and Susanne Garvis is a creative, critical and collective contribution that will touch every academic mother and those with whom she in relation where she lives and breathes her work: in the heart of the university. The 14 narratives of maternal embodied experience presented in this book are deliberately feminist, art-full and relational. In this way, each chapter asks readers to pay attention with slow and loving engagement as Michelle Boulous Walker (2017) suggests, which waits for the dust to settle, watches for impressions to emerge and wonders with imagination about motherhood as it is positioned in the academy today. Linda, Alison and Susanne seek to invite readers into this kind of reading because it matters, it matters that we attend to stillness and deep listening to maternal voices which once buried are now become unearthed in the context of university work and life. The stories shared in this work are intended to speak with love to all those who are mothering in the academy, to speak loudly back to the containing structures of neo-liberal, masculinist and patriarchal institutions, and to quietly affirm that non-conformity is a possible thing for maternal bodies in such times and places. The relationality that is embedded in this work stretches across m-othering academic generations and enfolds the wisdom of experienced academic matriarchs with those who are following and forever on their way in a care-full chapter and response conversation. The mothering words and worlds shared in this book speak a maternal rhythm which will resonate in unison with some and dis-harmonise with others, but they are offered in the hope that in such spaces of vulnerability there is challenge, there is change and there is connection—for after all, echoing and embracing the sense-and-response-abilities of Ruth Behar (1996), writing words about maternal worlds that don't break your heart, just isn't worth writing anymore.

***Villanelle #1: "The words of feminists carry me along"***

The words of feminists carry me along  
 As I write this review to, with and for you  
 We are volcanoes<sup>1</sup> and this is our mother's song

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman and mother<sup>2</sup>  
 Capital M for Man and P for patriarchy words, belongs to a/not-her  
 The words of feminists carry me along

Maternal bodies in the academy  
 Once un-seen now un-silenced and un-furled  
 We are volcanoes and this is our mother's song

Across and within time, these words are timeless  
 Descrying to disrupt definition and domination  
 The words of feminists carry me along

Expanding motherhood space  
 Collectively, creatively, critically and carefully  
 We are volcanoes and this is our mother's song

The mothe-r-evolution is becoming as I read  
 In slow-loving wisdom within and against  
 The words of feminists carry me along  
 We are volcanoes and this is our mother's song

I write this review immersed in the words and worlds of Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) and Ursula K. le Guin (1989). One of them a mother, the other without children, but both writing passionately about women's writing through their bodies in a language that made sense to them and to me. I write this review as I too try to make sense of myself as woman, as mother, as academic positioned in a room in an institution not of my own making and trying to break free.

***Villanelle #2: "She left the house to buy a carton of milk"***

She left the house to buy a carton of milk  
 The perfect homemaker contradicts the movement of life  
 She wipes her eyes with a handkerchief of silk

She climbs into her car in a daze  
 The mother has the pacifying illusion of ready-made  
 She left the house to buy a carton of milk

She drives forward knowing she can never save herself  
 Replaced without regret if she disappears  
 She wipes her eyes with a handkerchief of silk

She parks the car on an angle  
 And walks the aisles outside freedom  
 She left the house to buy a carton of milk

She pays with chapped hands and charred body  
She pauses in the uncertainty of her return  
She wipes her eyes with a handkerchief of silk

This mother, this woman, she is nothing on her own  
She puts herself on breed and feed for other's need her repeat  
She left the house to buy a carton of milk  
She wipes her eyes with a handkerchief of silk

### Figure 1

*She left the house to buy a carton of milk*



I write my responses in this review to the writing of women, mothers and academics, positioned each as they are in rooms of their own in institutions not of their own making, in the poetic form of “villanelles”. Villanelle, villan-elle. Vill extends to villa which expands to village and then to villagers who inhabit the collection of houses found in such places. Villan extends to villanus, a Medieval Latin term which describes the “inhabitant of a villa” or a “villager”, often used to refer to those people who were not free under English law but annexed to serve the Lord on whose soil the village was located upon. Villanus leads to villainy to villanage and then to villanella; an unsophisticated light 16th century song and dance style often displaying comic, sarcastic and rustic content intended to trouble the formal character of art music. From villanella I arrive at villanelle; and the writing of this review.

## Part One. Mothering Bodies and Sensations

### ***Villanelle #3: “The room holds her maternal body apart and together they breathe”***

The room holds her maternal body apart and together they breathe  
 Her thinking and wondering gives life to her separation  
 Rebirthing a yearning she un-earths her dis-ease

Wending and weaving and wording a thread  
 She dreams herself becoming with sense-able pleasures  
 The room holds her maternal body apart and together they breathe

Re-searching, re-sonding, re-thinking with the wisdom of wordstrings  
 She rhymes and she rhythms her motherly undulating colours once grey  
 Rebirthing a yearning she un-earths her dis-ease

She silently witnesses her flight as her motherly research breaks free  
 Inwards and outwards in a dynamic extension  
 The room holds her maternal body apart and together they breathe

She inhales the foul breath of his unloving institution  
 To her children he contains her as chattels he chastises  
 Rebirthing a yearning she un-earths her dis-ease

Her sorrow it creates as her joy it critiques

Pain is posted and passed in between  
The room holds her maternal body apart and together they breathe  
Rebirthing a yearning she un-earths her dis-ease

I write this review feeling this dis-ease the authors speak of right down to my bones. This is the flesh of life is you are a mother in the academy, knowing that your presence fills others with dis-ease. A mothering body is unpredictable, for we are always on call and our children take priority. A mothering body is irrational, for we are guided by a m-other reason. A mothering body is messy, untidy and abject, for we wend and wear our refusal to clean up with love and pride.

***Villanelle #4: "Our mothering bodies in secret we play"***

The personal-is-political sits with us day after day  
We try and we try to conform and contain—yet,  
Our mothering bodies in secret do play

The university machine, it roars and thunders  
Neoliberal clocks tick and they tock us into silence  
The personal-is-political sits with us day after day

We sigh as deadlines go whooshing by  
We write in a rite to that which is right  
Our mothering bodies in secret do play

We try not to be respair of men in dark times  
We hold onto love because of the promise it holds  
The personal-is-political sits with us day after day

We decide to take a stand because we need to be grounded  
It takes a dead mother to breathe life into the work they have killed  
Our mothering bodies in secret do play

In the everyday we are as interrupted as we are inauthentic  
We mind the c words and silence the f words  
The personal-is-political sits with us day after day  
Our mothering bodies in secret do play

I write this review reeling as yet another non-maternal body in an academic position professes his right to take away mine. He tells me my bodies of birthing, of emotion, of experience, and of knowledge, place him in discomfort—and that this is no good. If you want to be a good girl be a dutiful daughter not a mother. Don't take up too much room for I have some mansplaining to do. Thank you and sorry are your words not mine. Silence that too smart sassy lip. Go back home where you belong with that child on your hip. He sighs and throws his hand in the air, what on earth am I going to do with you if you refuse to comply?

***Villanelle #5: "A time to return to flesh and bones in remain"***

A time to return to flesh and bones in remain  
 Birthing wild and unruly energy we dream and connect  
 With intention we story ourselves back to reclaim

We lament as neoliberalism ravishes our families, bodies, hearts and souls  
 To our secrets we retreat to be with and beyond  
 A time to return to flesh and bones in remain

We are like poets in labour seeking to still time  
 And from the womb-room we write in sacred pause  
 With intention we story ourselves back to reclaim

Our writing lives in our bodies and etches our skin  
 These maternal scars words our worlds and sound our wounds  
 A time to return to flesh and bones in remain

We wilfully place ourselves in the sweat lodge to be  
 The slow cycle of not writing/writing becomes a slow loving wisdom  
 With intention we story ourselves back to reclaim

We dream and we write of when woman was free  
 In this darkness in this vulnerability the Mother is waiting  
 A time to return to flesh and bones in remain  
 With intention we story ourselves back to reclaim

I write this review and reflect on the mothering words and worlds of female academics I know; some I have known as sisters and friends forever it would seem, and others who I am only encountering for the first time in the pages of this text. This is heart-line work, work that is shared from the depths of a mother's heart and it is a mothers' heart-thinking I find my own responding to most passionately. Not all of the life experiences of mothering or the ways of rendering such mothering experiences meaningful beat in time with the waves of my own mothering heart-thinking and I find myself drifting into other theoretical waters to attend to the maternal bodies of experience and situatedness expressed here. No matter how far away my own maternal heart-thinking wanders—for I think this is the intention in this maternal academic work, to allow time for thinking to breathe in a slow and loving response—these are questions which keep drawing me back to shore are, “Who is a mother in the academy? Where is she? How is she?”

***Villanelle #6: “Where is she?”***

I keep searching the reference lists for writerly mothers  
 Where are the words of maternity living and breathing through thought?  
 I am confronted when mothering worlds are rendered meaningful by the thinking  
 of not m/others

All the great white men had one for sure  
 But can they speak for mothers as though they were one?  
 I keep searching the reference lists for writerly mothers

There are questions sitting in these pages  
 Around who owns maternal writing rights and rites  
 I am confronted when mothering worlds are rendered meaningful by the thinking  
 of not m/others

I am relieved when I hear her mother's voice whispering true  
 For is not maternal-ese a language she can call her own?  
 I keep searching the reference lists for writerly mothers

There are other uncertainties which sit with me as I read  
 Words birthing maternal worlds without ever being born  
 I am confronted when mothering worlds are rendered meaningful by the thinking  
 of not m/others



The power of maternal thinking is worded from deep down below  
 To that place in the dark, we are forever on the way  
 I keep searching the reference lists for writerly mothers  
 I am confronted when mothering worlds are rendered meaningful by the thinking  
 of not m/others

## Part two. Mothering Relations and Sensations

### *Villanelle #7: "To be two"*

To be two in the academy, to be there inbetween  
 Does she take flight, freeze or stay and fight?  
 A decision not her own and she tries not to make a scene

Her children sometimes play and stray at her feet  
 The one-eyed father looks down at the tear in her gown  
 To be two in the academy, to be there inbetween

In meetings she tries her to be the best blend  
 With a smart crease in her coat she covers the stains  
 A decision not her own and she tries not to make a scene

She watches others come and go and never return  
 She tries to share and show the way for maternal bodies to be  
 To be two in the academy, to be there inbetween

She watches the balls she juggles fly high in the air  
 She tiptoes her breath on one foot and pleads not one of them to fall  
 A decision not her own and she tries not to make a scene

At the end of the day she walks through her maternal door  
 Promising herself tomorrow she must do and be more  
 To be two in the academy, to be there inbetween  
 A decision not her own and she tries not to make a scene

I write this review thinking and wondering how on earth I am going to juggle the staff meeting that is scheduled for 3:00pm this afternoon when I know that my youngest son will be expecting me to pick him up on time from school. Should I ask him to catch a bus to the university and make his way to my office? It stops right outside and he knows

the way. Yes, I sigh with respair, he does know the way – for this dual life of academic mother is his too.

***Villanelle #8: “Her maternal body swells”***

Your maternal body swells and vulnerability grows large  
 You look good (enough) and your mothering becomes you  
 Their smiles hides a sneer for they are ready to take charge

You feel small and insignificant as your breasts and your belly expand  
 Never mind that your ruby slippers are now too tight on your feet  
 Your maternal body swells and vulnerability grows large

Who are you now? They ask with feigned innocence  
 Are you academic or are your mother?  
 Their smiles hides a sneer for they are ready to take charge

You know the policy, you’ve read between the lines  
 Is it worth the financial and professional sacrifice?  
 Your maternal body swells and your vulnerability grows large

First-time, multiple, single or in partnership  
 Deep down damned if you or damned you don’t  
 Their smiles hides a sneer for they are ready to take charge

Baby brain they decry and breast-feeding room they deny  
 The last particle of opportunity falls from your fingers like sand  
 Your maternal body swells and vulnerability grows large  
 Their smiles hides a sneer for they are ready to take charge

I write this review immersed in thinking about a-way of writing-as-methodology, a-way of writing-as-feminist methodology, and this text asks me attend to writing-as-mothering as a-way. Which methodological way does the will of mothers takes us into academia?

***Villanelle #9: “Mothering methodology, a-way”***

Mothering methodology, a-way  
 Becoming-maternal, becoming-with, becoming-writing

Creatively crafting the critical our fields of play

Stories honoured here, narratives woven now  
 Authoethnographic assemblages abound and astound  
 Mothering methodology, a-way

Bodies of maternal ways of knowing moving together and apart  
 In sense-and-response ability to the ethics of more-than and otherwise  
 Creatively crafting the critical our fields of play

A prose poetics brings words to maternal life as one, two and more  
 Fractured and fragile as they are fertile and fierce  
 Mothering methodology, a-way

Whose feminism? Ours we scream and we shout ma/eternally  
 The kind that is kind and represents our collective kind  
 Creatively crafting the critical our fields of play

Moving and shaking with reason beyond rationale  
 Embodying and affecting anew our response-abilities  
 Mothering methodology, a-way  
 Creatively crafting the critical our fields of play

I write this review with three other women by my side; none of whom finished secondary education or were admitted into the university. Their her/stories stand with me as part of my own and I can't help but think and wonder what we have gained, what we have lost, and where we are going to inbetween in our work as academic mothers. Have the questions changed or are they one and the same?

***Villanelle #10: "We think through our mothers and grandmothers if we are women"***

We think back through our mothers and grandmothers if we are women  
 How many have walked this academic way before us?  
 She wrote and reminded us, over three scores and ten

We demand to be admitted into your hallowed halls  
 They waited outside a cold and closed building  
 We think back through our mothers and grandmothers if we are women

How long would it take? How long would it be?  
Before the bodies of women gave birth to university  
She wrote and reminded us, over three scores and ten

Once the gatekeeper allowed them to cross the threshold  
Unruly daughters they were called and constrained  
We think back through our mothers and grandmothers if we are women

And now, what has changed as the doors seemingly swing wide?  
Is it better to be locked inside or to remain locked out?  
She wrote and reminded us, over three scores and ten

The weight of this her/story we now come to bear  
An academy reborn by maternal bodies both dangerous and daring  
We think back through our mothers and grandmothers if we are women<sup>3</sup>  
She wrote and reminded us, over three scores and ten

I finish writing this review feeling my maternal academic subjectivities renewed and reborn with the words of the authors in (Re)birthing the feminine in academe now joining those of Simone de Beauvoir and Ursula le Guin. Mothers in the academy are no longer lost but have announced their arrival. Mothers in the academy have arrived to claim their maternity and their intellectual destiny. Mothers in the academy reclaim all of the ones and the twos, refusing to be divided but to delight in the inbetween. Mothers in the academy give critical birth to wording and worlding a creative collectivity – in language and in writing a maternal room of their own.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Le Guin, 1986

<sup>2</sup> Beauvoir, 1949/2001

<sup>3</sup> Woof, 1929/2001