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Mother Matter: Transcorporeality in Carole Maso and Joan Didion

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Abstract
Rereading the Hymn to Demeter, *an early Western mother-daughter myth, as paradigm, this article traces female agency, narrative experimentation, and the merging of interiorities with the environment through two present-day stories of mothering and loss by female writers Carole Maso and Joan Didion. In each of the texts, affect and bodily experience contribute to formal alinearity and repetitive looping to challenge the emphasis on futurity that often governs procreative narratives. Simultaneity, not teleological progression, defines the contradictory emotional and physical states depicted in matrifocal texts. By examining the mother's experience in each text, I extend Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality – the always already occurring enmeshment of the human with the "more-than-human world" – through the physical body to the empathic, affective spheres.*

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Historically, motherhood is ill defined. Broad cultural narratives that tell us who becomes a mother – why and how – and describe the experience of mothering do not match up with the current realities of motherhood as articulated by mothers. From the mother's perspective, the choice to care for a child is, first and foremost, a choice, and, as such, is governed not by instinct so much as desire, uncertainty, and fear. Mothering, far from a selfless pursuit of another's best interests, is itself fraught with simultaneous contradictory emotions: love and resentment, passion and jealousy, and expectation and disappointment.

In texts by Carole Maso and Joan Didion, two contemporary female authors who are also mothers, I find alternative, openly ambivalent approaches to

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mothering; I suggest that their approaches offer mothering as a relational mode of being that has profound feminist and ecological implications. Maso's novel *Mother and Child* and Didion's memoir *Blue* Nights tell mother-daughter stories that undermine any teleological, linear approach to history and futurity. Cultural narratives of motherhood tend to be told through the progressive logic that patriarchal institutions of procreation presume, which Michael Warner calls "repro-narrativity" (7). In emphasizing the forward momentum of childbearing under the confines of natalist, heterosexist narrative traditions, most mother-daughter stories are daughter-centric. I argue, along with mothers studies advocate Andrea O'Reilly, that repro-narrativity, by eclipsing the perspective and voice of the mother, can severely restrict the types of stories imagined in fiction.

Maso's and Didion's works defy this confining future logic by insisting on the simultaneity of a mother's experience of past and future. Further, the texts demonstrate the mother's agency to craft her own matrifocal narrative, a term O'Reilly uses to describe a perspective that "insists that the experience of mothering must be understood as an intellectual, self-reflexive, and philosophical practice." (11). In matrifocal texts, the mother, rather than the child or partner, is the narrating consciousness and the protagonist. I trace the roots of these present-day narratives in one of the first Western mother-daughter stories, and one of the only matrifocal Western myths, the *Hymn to Demeter*, to show how stories from a mother's perspective provide a unique distillation of the exchange between body, environment, and affect. Each of these three mother-daughter stories vehemently denies a split between body and self, mother and child, and person and landscape. Examining motherhood outside the bounds of repro-narrativity – in essence, viewing motherhood as queer – brings awareness to the materially and affectively relational self.

Updating the Mother-Daughter Dyad

Women's agency in childbearing – and especially in pregnancy termination – is a centerpiece of ongoing national discourse on reproductive rights. In realms of academic discourse, however, the field of motherhood studies has polarized feminist studies since the publication of its inaugural text, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976). This essay looks to recent studies of adoptive mothering and queer mothering to update Rich's work while emphasizing the concerns she raised forty years ago that remain active and inadequately addressed. Here I incorporate the findings of core works in motherhood studies that emphasize the effects of mothering on selfhood.[1] Mother-daughter narratives present the self as relational: inextricably embedded in and connected to human and nonhuman realms. I situate contemporary motherhood and contemporary matrifocal narratives at the center of three crucial but often disconnected fields: feminist studies, queer studies, and environmental studies. Contemporary matrifocal narratives and contemporary motherhood scholarship continue to wrestle with Rich's examination of the

1 Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy's synthesis of debates in motherhood studies is particularly applicable. Samira Kawash's "New Directions in Motherhood Studies" (2011) offers an even more recent analysis.

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control of women's bodies and agency in a patriarchal society. Her words, written forty years ago, still resound: "Ideally, of course, women would choose not only whether, when, and where to bear children, and the circumstances of labor, but also between biological and artificial reproduction" (Rich 174–75). In this view, to have a child would be a project for a woman, the parameters of which she determines, rather than a requirement to fulfill her personhood. Mothering as contemporary praxis raises questions of female agency and planetary consequences.

Because my study engages an adoptive mother in Joan Didion and effectively single mothers in the *Hymn to Demeter* and in Maso's *Mother and Child*, I have tracked recent developments in motherhood studies that think outside the confines of the heterosexual, biological nuclear family. The concept of adoption has become a crucial component of several theorists' thinking about motherhood. In *Narrating Mothers*, Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy write:

> [. . .] all mothers are adoptive mothers, meaning that one "adopts" the child – whether one has given birth to that child or not – when one chooses to care for that child. We think this notion of "adoption" may serve as the foundation of a transformation of motherhood, as it is predicated upon the necessity of choice and thereby rejects essentialist views of women. (Daly 4)

This revision of motherhood as a chosen praxis is one way to, as Rich writes, "release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work" (280). As Didion's emphasis on her choice to adopt demonstrates, motherhood after feminism is framed as a *choice*, and for mothers privileged to make that choice, this changes the parent-child relationship in important ways. Understanding motherhood as adoptive – as requiring the mother's willful decision to mother – at once grants agency to the mother and ties her to the child in a new way, suggesting that in taking on a child, the mother extends her sense of self. The child can then be viewed, in one sense, as the mother's possession: an object outside the self that one considers part of one's identity.

Maso's and Didion's texts, in my reading, offer a queer view of motherhood, which I draw in part from Shelley Park, who calls the adoptive mother *queer*, arguing that no form of mothering is natural or essential. She writes, "there is something queer about any adoptive maternal body – a body that poses as, yet is not a 'real' mother; a body that presupposes, yet is defined in opposition to, procreative activity" (Park 202). Because all mothers who choose to care for children are functionally adoptive, choosing motherhood, rather than accepting it as biological destiny, makes room to question and comment on the cultural mandates and expectations for women with children. To understand motherhood as queer is to open it up to a new, more encompassing relationality that extends beyond the individuated self and beyond the nuclear family.

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A feminist, queer reading of motherhood posits that especially in an overpopulated world it is a choice that demands further examinations of what we presume to be natural or normal. In *Queer Ecologies*, Cate Sandilands, Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson write, "procreative heterosexuality is the root of the naturalizing of motherhood" (8). Motherhood is one form of behavior that has been sexually normalized to the extent that mothering outside of the nuclear family model is seen as unconventional. To denaturalize, denatalize motherhood is to describe it in nonessentialist and nondeterminist ways. To queer motherhood is to take it out of the realm of governing norms and expectations, to be willing to see it for its contradictory, unexpected, and norm-challenging qualities. Mothering, as I illustrate in the *Hymn to Demeter*, *Mother and Child*, and *Blue Nights*, challenges the concept of a separated, individualized self by requiring the mother to exist in a state of contiguous continuity with her child and her physical environment. The autonomous self is not only central to patriarchal institutions and narratives but also a crucial component of radical queer studies.[2] My analysis of mothering as a relational experience calls both the patriarchal and the queer versions of individual autonomy into question by affirming the intermingling physical and emotional experiences of the human self with the nonhuman and the other.

2 For example, Lee Edelman in *No Future* (2004) positions the queer self against procreative futures.

Our metaphors and language are deeply invested in analogizing the female body and the earth, as Carolyn Merchant makes plain in her hallmark work *The Death of Nature* (1980). Reproduction is deeply entrenched in the rhetoric of production and productivity in a capitalist society, which render both the female body and the planet's surface (plants, creatures, and the earth itself) viable for resource extraction. The female body and the planet's landscape are enmeshed by the slippery metaphors of fertility, barrenness, purity, and production. However, our understanding of the literal exchange between body and planet is inconsistent at best.

Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* (2010) provides a vocabulary for this kind of entanglement between the human and material worlds. An examination of motherhood requires attention to what she calls "trans-corporeality," in which "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (Alaimo 2). Every human body is materially connected to the earth in ways often elided or unexplored: allergens and pollutants have been prime sources of exploration for ecocritics and environmental writers since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), but the experience of motherhood makes this connection especially pronounced. Anything that enters the pregnant woman's body, any substance, can and will affect – risk – her and her child; but beyond the limits of natalist mothering, adoptive mothers, too, make choices that determine their child's exposure to contaminants – where to live, what to eat, what to drink. For mothers of all kinds, the experience of caring for a living being who constantly indicates your shared mortality extends transcorporeality beyond the physical to emotional and intellectual realms. I contend that depictions of motherhood in contemporary literature move across this divide to demonstrate the environmental entanglement of the human.

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Matrifocal narratives foreground awareness of this relationality between mother, child, and material world. Daly and Reddy draw on Rebecca Rubenstein's *Boundaries of the Self* to account for women writers whose texts bring this manifold enmeshment to light. "The very concept of the boundary itself is fluid" [8], "and women writers seem to be preoccupied with boundaries of various kinds: physical boundaries (as in pregnancy); psychological boundaries; relational boundaries (as in the experiences of attachment, union, separation, and loss); and the boundaries of families and cultures" (Daly 6). Not some essential female experience that leads to this attention to boundaries, it is rather mothering as *praxis*, especially when written from a matrifocal perspective that demonstrates transcorporeality. Because the boundaries between self and other are fluid from the point of view of the mother, according to Daly, the boundaries of genre become fluid in the writing of matrifocal texts. *Blue Nights* and *Mother and Child* cross the generic divides between autobiography and fiction: Didion's memoir is highly imaginative, weaving the hypothetical and the impossible into a narrative of real events, whereas Maso writes a novel of single motherhood that closely reflects her own experience as a lesbian mother, described in her memoir *A Room Lit By Roses* (2000). Both texts include the overlap between self and text in their fluid relationality.

In my analysis of the *Hymn to Demeter*, *Mother and Child*, and *Blue Nights*, I show that when mother-daughter relationships focus the narrative, textual representation resists the consecutive linearity usually found in stories of birth, growth, and death. For the mother, these events happen simultaneously through affect, impression, and imagination. The stories themselves move between material and emotional planes and proceed by a fluid and impressionistic logic, rather than by teleological order. The formal alinearity of these transcorporeal narratives of motherhood challenge patriarchal chronology and the progressive order that heteronormative family structures presume, offering a new model for the queer family and queer motherhood, what Shelley Park calls "a critical maternal praxis" (202). Both adoptive motherhood and single motherhood, in this view, queer traditional motherhood and offer a space from which to understand better the effects of mothering on the self. Rich writes, "this cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, and misused – is the great unwritten story" (225). Told from the mother's point of view, this cathexis is present in the classical mother-daughter story of Demeter and Persephone, where it already suggests transcorporeal experience, simultaneity, and the emotional paradox of motherhood. Reading the stories of mothers with only daughters, stories that focus on the loss (hypothetical or actual) of the only daughter to the mother, reveal the emotionally, materially, and environmentally embedded relational self.

Ancient Loss: Rereading Demeter & Persephone

Throughout the two contemporary matrifocal texts, I find evidence and traces of one of the only matrifocal narratives in classical Western literature, the *Hymn to*

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Demeter. The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* distills the mother-daughter tragedy to its basic components: the story's structure is the loss of the daughter, the mother's search for her, and their eventual, impermanent reunion. It establishes a number of patterns that contribute to a possible model for contemporary mother-daughter narratives: the mother's emotional potency, her experience of simultaneous loss and attachment, and the human relationship with nature as a refraction of the mother-daughter bond.

The hymn opens with a momentary separation between mother and daughter that results in a kidnapping. As Persephone gathers flowers, she reaches for the narcissus, which could reflect, as many readings attest, her vanity, but may also be interpreted as her attempt to articulate selfhood. The narcissus was planted by Zeus, however, "as a snare for the bloom-like girl," establishing a continuity between Persephone and the natural world. Demeter hears her daughter's cries as the earth opens up to take her, but the narrator does not follow Persephone in her capture; the reader, like Demeter, is left with only echoes of her cries. Instead, the hymn moves forward matrifocally, almost exclusively taking the perspective of the mother, who bears the role of single and sole parent to Persephone. Ellen Handler Spitz makes note of Demeter's singleness as a parent as a key component to the mother-daughter relationship it describes: "Never is [Zeus] portrayed as having direct contact with [Persephone]; her entire filiation is bound up with her mother" (412). The oneliness of mother and child is important for the replication of self in the story. This allows us to read Demeter as a mother in isolation, whose relationship to her daughter has perhaps more to do with partnership and companionship than any selfless, self-annihilating role. Single motherhood also conveys Demeter's agency in her relationship to her daughter and to the narrative. This pairing of mother and daughter takes a primary role in *Mother and Child* and in *Blue Nights*, which each speak from a single-mother's perspective about an only daughter.

As the story unfolds, we follow Demeter in her grief, allowing the reader to gain recognition of what the loss of a child looks like to the mother – a severing, a loss of identity. In Demeter's story, the kidnapping of Persephone implies both the loss of a female child to her new husband and the child's mortality, signified by a marriage to Hades, god of the underworld. While the story shows these events as violent and unexpected – the earth actually opens up to take Persephone while her mother is not looking – marriage and death are very basic realities of human life that many parents confront and that often correlate from the mother's perspective. The exaggeration of the loss (the fact that the daughter marries the god of the underworld) in this story helps capture the excess of feeling it inspires in the mother of an only child. The mother-daughter relationship as demonstrated in the *Hymn to Demeter* is predicated on loss – loss from the female realm into the male via marriage, or loss from life into death. With the child comes the threat of separation, itself a threat of self-loss or death.

In addition to the threat of loss, the relational position of the mother eclipses autonomous selfhood. Mother and daughter become extensions of one another.

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As the daughter-focused narrative cannot adequately account for the mother's perspective, so too the matrifocal narrative fails to address the daughter's experience. As Spitz explains, "the story of Demeter and Persephone gives priority to one role, namely, that of the mother, over that of the daughter. Yet, its fabric importantly suggests that daughter and mother are one and that their experiences both reciprocate and replicate each other" (411). Oneliness suggests codependence, in that mother and daughter mutually construct one another. Upon their reunion, Demeter and Persephone are called *homophrona*, like-minded, in their *thymon*, state of mind (Foley 60–61). Their emotional experiences overlap one another. Not necessarily a model for the like-mindedness of mothers and daughters, this is rather the perceived like-mindedness of mother and daughter in matrifocal narratives. This potential for misinterpretation – where the mother's emotional experience is mapped onto the daughter – resurfaces in *Mother and Child* and *Blue Nights*, taking the form of the mother's doubt and confusion about her daughter's state of mind.

The hymn actualizes loss as a metaphor for the role of the mother. Demeter makes manifest the mother's feeling of loss by literally running all over the earth with flaming torches in her hands:

> Bitter pain seized her heart, and she rent the covering upon her divine hair with her dear hands: her dark cloak she cast down from both her shoulders and sped, like a wild-bird, over the firm land and yielding sea, seeking her child…for nine days queenly Deo wandered over the earth with flaming torches in her hands, so grieved that she never tasted ambrosia and the sweet draught of nectar, nor sprinkled her body with water. (Evelyn-White 291–93)

The affective experience of being totally bereft becomes an action in the world, and it reflects the madness and fury of grief. Demeter disfigures herself and changes her identity; without her only child, she loses her own self. Spitz contends that this expression of emotion implies not just a loss of child, but also a loss of identity for Demeter. She writes, "Demeter's response to Persephone's disappearance has, on the other hand, elements of both narcissistic and object loss: she becomes by turns sorrowful, depressed, and bitterly indignant" (Spitz 413). Demeter's self-destructive behavior mimics the loss of her child, and in the process, she suggests the destruction of her own ability to continue to reproduce by aging herself. Her isolation in pain and the simultaneous power of her anguish construct the mother-daughter tragedy: emotion is power. She lost not just a daughter but also her role as mother and her concept of self. This loss will have profound ramifications for not only her own fertility but also the planet's.

Nourishment, food, and hunger are central to the story. Demeter does not eat, and her body begins to waste away. On the global scale, plants will not blossom; the natural cycles of the earth cannot progress, as long as Demeter is in mourning. The loss of Persephone to her mother threatens the continuation of human life:

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Demeter "plans an awful deed, to destroy the weakly tribes of earthborn men by keeping seed hidden beneath the earth" (Evelyn-White 315). Here, "seed" refers not to the notion of patriarchal legacy that it often implies regarding fertility but instead indicates Demeter's power to make the plants grow, the seed planted in the earth to raise crops. Human life depends on agriculture more than it does on reproduction, according to this story. Demeter's ties to the harvest give her immense power to wield. Motherhood and the earth's own life-giving power to raise plants intimately intertwine in this story of loss.

Motherhood, in the archive of symbols, has crucial ties to the land and its processes and changes. This can be demonstrated on a basic linguistic level. Adrienne Rich identifies this overlap of motherhood and earthly production as a motif, even in "prepatriarchal thought":

> Out of the earth-womb vegetation and nourishment emerged, as the human child out of the woman's body. The words for mother and mud (earth, slime, the *matter* of which the planet is composed, the dust or clay of which 'man' is built) are extremely close in many languages: *mutter*, *madre*, *mater*, *materia, moeder*, *modder*. (107–08)

Thus thoughts of motherhood have a linguistically reinforced tie to the productivity of the earth, and as the *Hymn to Demeter* shows, loss of a child reflects barrenness and an end to growth. Her love for and connection to her daughter is so great that she denies all of the earth's life-giving properties. In her grief Demeter gains the stubborn, dogged will – the absolute agency and power – that enables her to bring her daughter back. The hymn emphasizes this connection between emotion and power: "Yet no one was able to persuade her mind and will, so wroth was she in her heart; but she stubbornly rejected all their words: for she vowed that she would never set foot on fragrant Olympus nor let fruit spring out of the ground, until she beheld with her eyes her own fair-faced daughter" (Evelyn-White 307). Demeter's anger and obstinacy, her willingness to risk all human life for the sake of her daughter, are at the heart of the myth. Her love for her child is bound up with "wroth," most potent anger. In the hymn, this emotional power translates into power over the natural processes of the earth; in *Mother and Child* and *Blue Nights*, Maso and Didion continue to wrestle with the profound connection between emotional experience and the natural environment.

The outcome of the Demeter narrative is the establishment of seasons; Persephone returns to her mother but only for part of the year, and for that time, the earth bears fruit. For the other months, she returns to the realm of the dead, and the earth becomes dormant. The child is lost and not lost. Dead and not dead, which reflects the way the earth relies on death and decomposition to sustain growth. Rich describes, "in winter, vegetation retreats back into the earth-womb; and in death the human body, too, returns to that womb, to await rebirth . . . Here we see one of the many connections between the idea of the Mother and the idea of death – an association which remains powerful in patriarchal thought,"

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(108). Within the idea of the life-giving mother is the possibility for destruction. These two coexist in the concept of the maternal. The child is connected to the seasons, to the cycles of the earth. Transcorporeality has not just material but symbolic power to connect the body of a mother to the earth and planetary time.

Contemporary Motherhood: Carole Maso's *Mother and Child*

A return to one of the originary Western mother-daughter myths establishes an important set of possible motifs for the reexamination of motherhood: the singleness of the mother – both her agency and her one-on-one relationship with her child; the inevitability of the loss of the child to the mother; the power of the mother's fear and grief; the tie between motherhood, affect, and the natural environment; and the coexistence of birth and death as evidenced by the seasons, which reflect the mother's loss and not-loss of her child. With these elements in mind, I turn to experimental novelist Carole Maso for a contemporary treatment of the mother-daughter relationship from the single-mother's perspective.

Maso's most recent book, *Mother and Child,* tells the tale of a nameless mother and daughter, referred to throughout as "the mother" and "the child," who have spent the first years of the daughter's life in apparent isolation. The book is dedicated "in memory of the disappearing men, who were my friends," followed by a list of male poets and writers. The rest of the novel is haunted – and made possible – by the disappearance of men: "After all it was the Time of Disappearance, and all across the Valley the men had begun to vanish" (Maso 9). Because men are absent, mothering is a female and solitary in the Valley. Mother and child, "like so many others . . . fled the burning city and returned to this dark wood, but [the mother] wondered now if by choosing to come back here to the place of her childhood, she was putting them at risk in some way" (2). The mother's fears are confirmed and brought to fruition by a series of mystical arrivals that give structure to this otherwise amorphous text: first a tree, then bats, then as ship called the Spiegelpalais, then a talking bat, and a talking stuffed animal. As mother and daughter leave the house, they encounter the Aging Stage, the Cocoon Theater of Miracles, and many other strange happenings that seem to be a part of a night circus. Dream blends with reality blends with fantasy, thought blends with dialogue, settings shift and merge, and characters transform into one another. The plot is nearly impossible to follow, let alone summarize. Nevertheless, this constant movement and fragmentation is itself an argument against the linearity of time or experience for the mother and child.

The book opens with the arrival of the Great Wind, a marker of the beginning of transformation. The first image of mother and child takes place in the house: "Inside, the child was stepping from her bath and the mother swaddled her in a towel" (1). The mother muses, "overnight the house has changed shape. It was now a marvel of transparency. The walls seemed to disappear, and all around them

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the green world pulsed" (6). The transcorporeality of the mother's experience is first this merging and intermingling of interior and exterior spaces that bring with them fear and uncertainty.

Mother and daughter are a unit unto themselves. The child is aware that she does not have a father, stating, "all I have is a Glove!" (157). It is not clear how a glove is a substitute for a father, but this possibility in the world of the novel is confirmed by another characters, the motherless Girl with the Matted Hair, who says, "a father is not an Absolute. No one absolutely needs one . . . And it was true in the Valley that with each passing year, there were fewer and fewer fathers to be had. Sometimes a Glove is enough, she said. Sometimes a Glove will suffice. A father isn't a Necessity. A father isn't a Requirement" (157). This text's example of mothering seems to take place outside the patriarchal structures that Rich identifies or perhaps in open resistance to them. Placed in the biographical context of Maso's memoir about lesbian motherhood and her daughter, the family in *Mother and Child* could be termed a queer one, though queerness is not made explicitly sexual in the novel. However, motherhood is denaturalized, opening it up to a kind of queer scrutiny. The mother and daughter are a family unto themselves, much as Demeter and Persephone were. The novel presents a single-mother's response to her only daughter's inevitable growth and change, which coincides with the enmeshment of their shared private, interior sphere with the external, natural, and community worlds.

The mother's response to her daughter is dictated by fear and uncertainty. The opening makes clear the mother's attempt to isolate and protect her daughter, which her only child status emphasizes and makes extreme. The text establishes a link early on between motherhood and fear: to be a mother inspires fear. The storm that brings in the initial possibility of change represents a shift in the mother's understanding from having created a world unto herself with her daughter to a world that she cannot control:

> The mother felt at the mercy of all things: the wind, the tree, the story, the child's beautiful and curious face, the rate at which the rose opened. . . . The world possessed the mother and not the other way around: she did not possess the world. . . . The night world pressed up against them. There was no way of partitioning it. The mother knew there was no safe place inside, though she did not like to think of it. (2–3)

The fears that accompany motherhood for the mother in Maso's novel give the lie to both the mother's and child's boundaries. The natural world, which takes the infiltrating forms of darkness, wind, and uncanny bright light, permeates the home and the mother's imagination. In much the same way as the interior world of emotion is turned out in the Greek hymn, making Persephone's curious vanity, her descent, and her mother's grief manifest in the external world, so too the transformation of the daughter, her aging, is rendered in Maso's text as a palpable event: overnight, "something had entered the house" (4).

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The arrival of the Great Wind, which brings the tree and bats into the house, demonstrates for the mother that this difference between reality and imagination has never been a stable or reliable one, and nor has the difference between interior and exterior, body and landscape. Maso writes, "How vulnerable are the dwellings we humans make for ourselves to inhabit, the mother thought later. When the child dwelled in the mother, the mother had passed oxygen and nutrients to the child through the placenta. She thought of the permeable world and all that was porous and of the insistence of the fetus that had knitted itself within her womb" (11–12). She then opens her home to the natural world in awareness that its borders were only ever imaginatively constructed. The porousness of the borders of her home reflects her recognition of the porousness of the limits of her own body when she carried the child.[3] This porousness or permeability is transcorporeality by another name. The mother first becomes aware of her body's transcorporeal potential when pregnant with a child to whom she passed "oxygen and nutrients" "through the placenta"; and yet this material connection offers up a lifelong metaphor for the tethered experience of mothers and children.

3 An article published in December 4, 2012, in *Scientific American*, provides evidence for this observation. Cells of the child have been discovered not just in the mother's body but also in her brain, suggesting that mother and child are neurologically connected on a biological level (Martone).

Ostensibly, the mother's fear that the novel presents is a fear of the bats, of the uncontrollable natural world entering her ordered sphere. However, what is at the root of her fear? What is so fearful about having a daughter? At a certain point in the book, the child loses her stuffed lamb. This gives way to the mother's musing on loss, and her devising a way to prevent it. "The mother's fear was that now the child could float off too. In the night, the mother made a second tether, this one out of a satin ribbon, to keep the child awhile longer. She thought of all the things that could no longer be held by the earth, utterly exempt from its charms, things with reluctance the earth gave up, or the sky attracted" (119). She ties the child to the earth to keep her from floating away, another externalized version of her emotional impulse to maintain – make manifest and material, externalize – her attachment to the girl.

The relationship between mother and daughter that the book presents is complex and undermined by fear, envy, and uncertainty. The mother's fear for the child's inevitable growing old is linked to her own longing for youth: "Exiled from childhood, but in the constant presence of it, the mother felt covetous of the child sometimes because the child still had childhood, and to the mother, childhood was no longer accessible" (31). The daughter becomes a proxy for the mother, reminding her of the parts of life that have been lost to her. Like Adrienne Rich's analysis of motherhood and the complex portrait of the mother in the *Hymn to Demeter*, Maso's contemporary exploration expresses a certain ambivalence at the heart of motherhood and daughterhood: love coupled with hate, life coupled with death. Present in the earliest myth, this ambivalence is now being recovered by new explorations of motherhood in contemporary circumstances, not as opposites contained within one another, but rather as simultaneity, a constant flux. This motherhood emphasizes the same continuity and fluidity across

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borders that characterize Alaimo's transcorporeality. Moreover, it goes both ways; the daughter feels it too: "Sometimes the child hated the mother so much, it frightened her. Some days the feelings were so explicit that she had to cuddle up with the mother a long time to find her way back to her" (45). Part of the paradoxically simultaneous processes of separation and attachment, long narrated by Freudians as a progression from one stage of life to the next, is a mutual fear and hate between mother and child. As Maso's book expresses on every level, fluidity and porousness of borders, the presence of memory and imagined futures, the simultaneity of having and losing the daughter, all mark the mother's experience.

There is not one point at which she has the daughter, and a later point at which she loses her. Rather, having her is always bound up with losing her. The mother in Maso's text is hyperaware of this complex state that motherhood engenders:

> On the Aging Stage the child is a toddler, or the mother is a child, and the Grandmother from the North Pole is young again. Only to die. Even the future seems in memorial, taking on an eerie burnished quality as if it has already passed. Every moment frays and unravels. The child's child running in the grass. The mother picks her up, but already her skull is covered with moss. (106–07)

This unraveling of linear time that motherhood presents to the mother, who sees her daughter at every possible age, requires a different type of storytelling. The text becomes more a collection of nonlinear images that together, from fragments, form a narrative of mother and child more akin to the mother's experience of motherhood. The mother's fear and dread over her daughter's aging spreads not just to encompass their multigenerational family, but also to merge with the changing natural environment. The daughter's death is signified by a merging with the earth, her "skull . . . covered with moss." The awareness of change that motherhood fosters leads to an ecological awareness: "Frogs can be said to have beautiful voices, especially at mating season, but one part per billion of weed-killer in the water shrinks the voice box of the male frog, and they cannot sing their song so well. The earth was turning from one kind of place into another. This frightens the mother who knows all things must change" (30). Environmental decay is linked in the mother's mind to her fear of change, which her daughter has inspired and emphasized.

Carole Maso's novel about motherhood is a story of fear and dread, one that centers on the question of how to protect the unprotectable, how to evade the inevitable loss of the child. However, the loss in *Mother and Child* is more a metaphoric or figurative one than any kind of literal death. At the end of the book, the reader is left without resolution. The ambiguity suggests that, like Persephone, the child is lost and not lost. She remains with the mother, but their separation is growing as the child ages and the mother loses her connection to childhood. Maso uses an experimental form, moving backward and forward in time, expanding

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small details until they become great events, collapsing the novel's timeline into a simultaneity.

Losing the Only Daughter: Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*

> *It is horrible to see oneself die without children.* Napoléon Bonaparte said that.
> *What greater grief can there be for mortals than to see their children dead.* Euripides said that.
> *When we talk about mortality we are talking about our children.*
> I said that. (Didion 13)

Joan Didion is not known for her formal innovation or for her feminism. She is known for her acute observations about the intersections of personal experience and political realms. This keen perception of her relationship to wider systems of industry and ecology, coupled with her prose style's signature repetitions and refrains, opens up new readings of her work's feminist potential.

Nowhere is this style more palpable than in her most recent book, *Blue Nights*, a short but captivating glimpse at the life of an adoptive mother who has lost her daughter. It offers frank insight into motherhood, affect, and fear. Like Carole Maso's book, *Blue Nights* describes a nontraditional motherhood that occurs outside the confines of a typical family structure. The nonlinear, meditative book focuses on Didion's relationship to her daughter and her witnessing of her daughter's hospitalization and deterioration after the death of Didion's husband, John Gregory Dunne. Her sharply personal reaction to the loss of her child, which is also the loss of her status as mother, reveals itself in her confounding confrontations with the contemporary medical establishment, before whom she is ignorant and helpless. She asks what the loss of a child really means for the mother, which is one of the basic conundrums of motherhood. By returning to certain phrases, images, and scenes as refrains, Didion's style reflects her own experience of time as a mother: like the text, time folds continuously in on itself.

Didion's book, a "material memoir," in Stacy Alaimo's terms, reveals, "how profoundly the sense of selfhood is transformed by the recognition that the very substance of the self is interconnected with vast biological, economic, and industrial systems that can never be entirely mapped or understood" (95). Alaimo analyzes several works whose authors explore the way toxic environments play out in their authors' bodies under the aegis of "material memoir," including cancer memoirs and works about the experience of multiple chemical sensitivity. Alaimo specifically rejects the potential for motherhood writing to offer unique insight into transcorporeal experience. "The pernicious formulation of mother as matter is overwhelmed by a more complex, less gendered understanding of ourselves as material selves, embedded in processes that are simultaneously biological and social, scientific and personal" (105). Alaimo hesitates to speak

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directly to the types of material embeddedness motherhood and mothering brings to light. I admire her feminist impulse to avoid gendering the material self, to avoid essentializing the female body. But as I demonstrate, motherhood viewed materially, written from a feminist perspective, a queer matrifocal perspective, has the capacity to shed light on material embeddedness for everyone with a body – for mothers and nonmothers – and to go further than material connection, to suggest a deeper *psychologically relational* position of the self with respect to the world. A psychologically relational position that mothers – adoptive or biological – are uniquely situated to expose.

Didion does not shy away from the basic ambivalence about motherhood that Rich and Maso emphasize. Mothering is a choice that she makes but is never wholly sure of. Her narrative makes it clear that she was never positive she would have children, but that a desire for a child came upon her in her mid twenties. The decision to adopt was more a surprise than a plan. She emphasizes her uncertainty and her lack of confidence in her ability to care for a child (at least in retrospect). She even goes so far as to suggest that the child is an object, a possession. Didion stresses that the choice to adopt was based on her own need for a child, or better her need for *something* in her life, rather than a fulfillment of her role as a female or a logical conclusion of married life. In fact, at one point she compares having a child at the time to following the season's fashion trends, and stresses that not until her friend mentioned the need to acquire a bassinette before bringing the child home did the decision seem any more significant than "the Jax jerseys and printed cotton Lily Pulitzer shifts we were all wearing that year" (Didion 58). One of many moments of self-incriminating frankness, this has two effects: it reveals Didion's flaws and demonstrates her deep attachment to her daughter, for good or for ill.

The awareness of transcorporeal embeddedness links in Maso's and Didion's texts to fear. Like Maso, Didion focuses on the fear that accompanies the arrival of a child. She writes:

> When we think about adopting a child, or for that matter about having a child atall, we stress the 'blessing' aspect. We omit the instant of the sudden chill, the"what-if," the free fall into certain failure. *What if I fail to take care of this baby?What if this baby fails to thrive, what if this baby fails to love me?* And worse yet,worse by far, so much worse as to be unthinkable, except I did think it, everyonewho has ever waited to bring a baby home thinks it: *what if I fail to love thisbaby?* (58).

Motherhood is tied to guilt from its outset. Each myth of the mother-daughter relationship unpacks this element – Demeter's guilt in her grief, the mother's guilt in being unable to protect her child from the outside world in Maso, and Didion's guilt at being unable to care for her baby properly. Like the simultaneous love and hate, love and envy Maso describes, motherhood presents an emotional paradox and requires coexistence of divergent emotional states. She needs the child as much as the child needs her, a fact that the traditional narrative, the procreative,

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future-oriented, child-centered narrative of selfless mother caring for children, mother giving up herself for her children, does not acknowledge.

Quintana's psychological instabilities, "her depths and shallows, her quicksilver changes," are central pieces of *Blue Nights*, ones that Didion struggles to address directly. The cause of her death is the memoir's lacuna and its circuitous obsession. Didion mentions various diagnoses from various medical professionals, including manic depression, OCD, depression, and anxiety. A big word missing from the text – the biggest omission, according to some reviewers – is "alcoholism." Didion mentions her daughter's drinking only once, in passing, but dwells guiltily, even incredulously, on her own drinking habits, before and after becoming a mother, throughout the text. She writes that one of her subjects, one of the subjects she thought at the outset she was exploring in *Blue Nights,* is the complex, ambiguous relationship between parent and child, "the ways in which we depend on our children to depend on us . . . the ways in which our investments in each other remain too freighted ever to see the other clear" (53). Didion's observational acuity surrounding the causes and events of her daughter's illness and death are so hazy throughout the text. Didion cannot question or comment on her daughter's behavior without reflecting that critique back onto herself as a mother, as a woman. She writes, "What I had not seen, or what I had in fact seen but had failed to recognize, were the 'frantic efforts to avoid abandonment' [part of Quintana's borderline personality disorder diagnosis]. How could she have ever imagined that we could abandon her? Had she no idea how much we needed her?" (49). She cannot recognize her daughter's fear of abandonment because she is so caught up in her own need for the child. Didion's examination of her fraught, codependent relationship with her mother suggests that at moments of extremity, matrifocal narratives unearth the problematic and child-erasing potential of maternal texts.

Didion's need for her child resurfaces at the end of the book, when the author's own physical and mental frailty lands her in the hospital. When asked for her emergency contact, Didion can think of no one in her life who needs to know that something has happened. "Only one person needs to know. She is of course the only person who needs to know" (187). That her daughter has been dead for two years is, here and elsewhere, beside the point: maternal connection, or that fundamentally relational sense of self, one that both needs and relies on the other to need, transgresses the line between alive and dead. Again, the blindness, the willful ignorance that motherhood entails, surfaces in the matrifocal narratives. It is the blindness of empathy, the projection of emotion onto another.

More explicitly than any other motherhood narrative I have read, Didion's makes the connection between mother and child, child and mother's self, apparent. To return to the same moment, when Didion thinks back on her own writing process midway through the book – a self-reflective move that happens in almost every chapter of *Blue Nights* – Didion writes, "When I began writing these pages I believed their subject to be children, the ones we have and the ones we wish we had. . . . The ways in which neither we nor they can bear to

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contemplate the death or the illness or even the aging of the other" (Didion 53). To contemplate the death or illness or aging of the child is to confront her own frailty and impermanence: the two are tethered.

> As the pages progressed it occurred to me that their actual subject was not children after all, at least not children *per se*, at least not children *qua* children: their actual subject was this refusal even to engage in such contemplation, this failure to confront the certainties of aging, illness, death. This fear. Only as the pages progressed further did I understand that the two subjects were the same. (53–54)

Her reflections on motherhood merge seamlessly with her reflections on her own aging and frailty. The relational position of the mother demands that she "confront the certainties of aging, illness, death," or at least address her failure to confront these suddenly practical questions. The overlap of mother and child is nowhere more apparent than in this question of mortality. This emotional overlap appears already in the Demeter and Persephone story: from the mother's perspective, it is always primarily about loss, grief, and anguish.

Like Maso's *Mother and Child,* the writing of *Blue Nights* gave rise to an alinear, unconventional form. Unlike the *Hymn to Demeter*, whose author is still debated, but which in all likelihood comes from a male writer, *Blue Nights* is matrifocal in that the mother tells it with her own words and in her own style. Didion refers explicitly to the changes her style undergoes when she loses Quintana and finds herself unable to put words to the page, to begin to describe her experience in a direct way. She is confounded by her need, as writer, to state things directly, and her inability to do so when it comes to motherhood. In order to be direct, Didion approaches the topic of motherhood through a looping style that challenges the "momentum" she describes herself trying to achieve in the emotional process of grieving. As she learns in the wake of these two deaths, her frantic attempts to keep working – book touring and playwriting and producing – to assert productive effort in the face of mortality and loss, to move forward, are ultimately ineffective. *Blue Nights* suggests that plowing forward is not the way to deal with the transcorporeal realities that motherhood, especially fear for and loss of child, brings to light. Instead, the text eventually becomes its own argument for "dwelling on it" (what Quintana tells her mother not to do), dwelling on contradictory emotions and experiences, and sitting with the uncertainty, precarity, and simultaneous fear of and desire for a bond with and separation from a child. A child always already means mortality, means death in life. As *Blue Nights* makes plain, this transcorporeal awareness of death manifests itself as powerful vulnerability in matrifocal narratives.

Conclusion: Motherhood, Mortality, and Transcorporeal Empathy

As when the arrival of the grandfather clock in Maso's novel brings with it a mysterious coffin shaped box, so the passage of time in the presence of her child

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signals a mother's mortality. This paradox of motherhood, the connection to time and the refusal of its passing, the way death is contained in the youngest forms of life, establishes the link between motherhood and environment that I observe in the *Hymn to Demeter*, *Blue Nights*, and *Mother and Child*. At its heart, this is an acknowledgment of and a living with the most painful simultaneity, one that we often seek to understand with the metaphors of natural cycles: changing seasons, passing days.

Blue Nights opens at the same twilight hour as *Mother and Child* with a description of that certain kind of twilight called the blue nights (or the gloaming or l'heure bleu):

> *During the blue nights you think the end of day will never come. As the blue nights draw to a close (and they will, and they do) you experience an actual chill, an apprehension of illness, at the moment you first notice: the blue light is going, the days are already shortening, the summer is gone. This book is called "Blue Nights" because at the time I began it I found my mind turning increasingly to illness, to the end of promise, the dwindling of the days, the inevitability of the fading, the dying of the brightness. Blue nights are the opposite of the dying of the brightness, but they are also its warning.* (4)

This phenomenon, the blue light of summer nights, marks the passing of the seasons on the east coast and coincides with Didion's mourning period for both her husband and daughter. Her analysis of the passage of time and the changing of seasons links to and captures her experience of motherhood: an experience of unusual brightness that contains the promise of death within it. She brings us back, then, to Persephone, whose yearly reunion with her mother is forever tainted by the certainty that she must return to the land of the dead.

New versions of motherhood offer alternate understandings of family, of legacy, of the relationship between mother, child, and landscape. From the *Hymn to Demeter* to Maso's and Didion's recent works, a new paradox of motherhood emerges that calls futurity into question and allows the past to relive and rewrite itself in the present. Nowhere is it expressed more concisely than in Didion's metaphoric use of seasonal phenomena: "Blue nights are the opposite of the dying of the brightness, but they are also its warning" (4). Having a child is in many ways the opposite of death, especially within the patriarchal framework of legacy, but as these narratives show, it also affirms the mother's mortality. Having a child demands the mother's recognition that these opposites are deeply embedded in one another, both in a mother's consciousness of her own mortality and in human awareness of environmental change.

By embedding opposites – life bound up with death, youth caught up in aging – *Mother and Child* and *Blue Nights* rely on the malleability of time and space made possible by motherly experience, emphasizing the transcorporeality of maternity. Maso makes this plain and manifest, on the level of mother's and daughter's physical interactions with their immediate environment. Their lives are porous

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and open to the effects of the changing world that surrounds them, and vice versa. Didion uses affective experience and memories to come to a similar conclusion: that a mother's experience, even without the physical occupancy of one body of pregnancy, is entangled with her child's, even when the child is no longer living. The mother-daughter narrative – Adrienne Rich's "the great unwritten story" – ruptures the traditional, heteronormative concept of family by challenging linearity and defying the clarity of divisions between present and past, self and other, and body and environment.

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