



Mother Mountain Ghost, 2011.

*Nothing could have prepared me for the realization that I was a mother, one of those **givens**, when I knew I was still in a state of uncreation myself (Adrienne Rich: 35).*

As a new mother I desire to be a good mother, but have to chart my own map of what that looks like. I cannot stay at home full time, nor do I want to. (Even in writing that, I realize there is a certain level of guilt implicit in that statement.) Why are we still so caught in this dilemma of identity? In Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* she proposes patriarchy as the institution limiting and defining women's experience;

Throughout this book I try to distinguish between two Meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: *the potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims

at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. (13)

I have found being a mother a paradox between celebration and erasure. Verbal support is accompanied by an unstated request that motherhood not impinge on how I act in my career, social, or outward facing life. I try to make decisions that affirm my self-determination, yet I would be lying if I said that it is not deeply challenging.

I made *Mother Mountain Ghost* in Banff, Alberta, while taking part in a thematic residency at the Banff Center for the Arts. As a primarily single mother, I brought my eighteen-month old daughter. I asked my mother to come as well, so that I could participate in the residency.

My experience at Banff contained the familiar pressure -- to be two separate things -- she who spends time with her own mother and daughter, and she who participates as artist in the intense lifestyle of the residency. I felt myself attempting to balance both lives, while often feeling I was neglecting one or the other. There were nights of trying to maintain the social life of a residency participant, followed by early mornings with a sick child. I didn't feel I could explain to either the dilemma of being two things. It is, as Ursula K. LeGuin states, "...the heroic myth demands that the two jobs be considered utterly opposed and mutually destructive (174)." The myth perpetuates the mistaken possibility of calmly turning to one thing *or the other*.

In direct response to this residency experience, but more generally as I unraveled the identity of mother, I stood in front of a mountain with a sheet over myself and my daughter (*to be a mother and to be a mountain and to be a ghost*). The performance underlines existence and erasure, with the idea that doubling of known and unknown creates a space for something yet unnamed. My claiming multiple identities (*mother mountain ghost*) and performing their disappearance is informed by Peggy Phelan's idea of performance. She states, "Performance's being....becomes itself through disappearance (146)." The disappearance in this case is of the moment the image was taken, but also the labored and futile attempt at hiding the figure of mother and child underneath a sheet. We do not blend into mountain, we do not become a ghost and we are not discernible entirely as mother and child. The stated attempt at erasing through performative action, as well as the inherent fleeting nature of photography, creates a space of disappearance synonymous with the creation of an unknown.

Philip Auslander speaks to the dual status of performance documentation as both documentary and theatrical. The question he poses is whether the event was for an audience or whether the performance was for the camera, and how this changes the documentation. (2) In this case, the theatrical event occurs for the purpose of a photograph *and* also exists as a radical testimony to the experience of motherhood between generations. My mother was the one to capture this image with my camera, inhabiting my role as photographer as I became/was the new mother. The photograph

is the mirror as three generations of women who observe and document one another in a state of appearance and disappearance. The photograph is thus imbued with *the performance which has happened*, and also the *continuing performance* of motherhood.

The performance and the act of motherhood both create something beyond the world as we have been taught to know it. To refuse to conform through both acts is the radical gesture. The radical act refuses language and becomes an invitation to invent a word to call this new kind of *mother mountain ghost*. What if the shape in front of you is a ghost, what if it is a mother, or a mountain? What happens when our memory of what a thing should be encounters an unforeseeable event?

Mother Mountain Ghost holds a body to a space in a process of becoming and un-becoming. It is the pressure of a body with another body (who is my child) on the present tense. In this confusion of an extended present, where the viewer must move backwards and forwards in time to regain their balance, there is a tiny tear in the

...continuous cloth of duration as well as miniscule faults
in the surface of things, places and people. Like David in
the den of Goliath: the glance is a slingshot that penetrates
the armamentarium of duration and space, creating leakage
in the universe that appears to us to form a single whole (Casey 91).

The fragmentation of the whole occurs through the excessive present, existing further and beyond rational boundaries of language and morality. Can the image without a name halt the time of normal vision? I would propose that it can; locating oneself in the present is made more subversive and unstable through pulling the image away from the words we know.

The performance creates a visual palimpsest in which boundaries such as mother or artist or nature or human are obscured. I am many things and none. What do you *call* us? If I erase the image that has the name, but leave the form, mustn't we find a new word?

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The performance pokes a hole through time and meaning. Words leak out.

Works Cited

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