Maternal Journeys and the Power of Storytelling

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Abstract

This MA thesis project visually translates and investigates the journeys of ten mothers from eight different countries who all reside in Finland, as well as one Finnish midwife/doula. It is a two part project involving a visual production component informed by immersive interviews with women and a written component. The project non-objectively explores positive community impact through the empowerment of women by means of visual art and storytelling. Artistic research is used to examine how foreign women in Finland birthing their children travel through birth and emerge as mothers, as well as their internal paths as journeying women. Research methodology is qualitative multimethodology as data is collected through interviews and storytelling. Both common and non-common denominators in the stories are considered as well as the roles of partners, midwives, doulas and distant families. Visual stories are created using relief method printmaking on rice paper for a community storytelling event for mothers and midwives held on the International Day of Midwives.

Research is furthered by examining the work of other artists who use visual art and storytelling to empower women and make positive impacts on their communities. The theme is rooted in the theories of great thinkers of our time, such as Sara Ruddick’s writing on maternal thinking, Hanna Rosin’s views on the changing roles of women in our society, Angela Davis and Audre Lorde on the power of self care, Julia Kristeva’s maternal passion theory and Dorothy E. Smith’s feminist sociology.
Introduction

As I write this, I’m in the middle of the tornado of mothering an infant for the first time. It is a frazzled juxtaposition against the peacefulness of my pregnancy. Instead of feeling fragile, vulnerable or weak, I feel more powerful, creative and confident than I have ever before in my life; though, finding the time to assert this energy anywhere but within the care of my child is a challenge. Throughout the course of my pregnancy, the emotional energy opened my heart and mind and allowed me to take my work as an artist to the next level. Because of the way women and motherhood are perceived in Western cultures, the concept of maternal power was new to me, and I was pleased to find the concept in the writings of great thinkers of our time.

Retaining my voice as a mother in presenting this research is both unavoidable and preferable. I chose to intentionally approach my subject with a non-objective stance, to embrace and use my all-consuming experience as a mother, instead of trying to hide it at the risk of falling into subjectivity. I am a researcher, an artist, a woman, and a mother. I used myself as a subject for this project, as well as using my experience to deepen my research through interviews with other mothers. The women I interviewed were able to open up to me in a different way because they knew I could empathize with their experience, as our children play on the floor together nearby, or breastfeed while we talk. My experience has given me a unique lense to view this subject, and it has allowed me to take the project to a deeper level. Storytelling and art are vulnerable acts
of the human experience, important to our collective growth and knowledge, and I would be hindering my purpose if I removed my own human experience from the process.

When I was pregnant, my supportive Midwife, Johanna Sarlio-Niemenen, introduced me to the tool of labyrinth for pregnancy, labour and the three months postpartum. The Yeborinth. It became an important visualization during the remainder of my journey into motherhood, and I used this visual as a prompt for the stories I gathered during my research.

![Yeborinth](image)

The night Johanna introduced me to the Yeborinth, I dreamed my labor visualized amongst the towering hedges as I journeyed closer to my babe. The Yeborinth came alive for me after this, and I closed my eyes to visualize my journey often, especially when I needed reminding that there would be a curve in the path soon, and a change of scenery. My labour in the Yeborinth was long. There were benches to rest upon as well as monsters to fend off and riddles to solve. But I was not there alone, and if I felt stuck, I need only remind myself there would be a patch of roses and sunshine beyond the
next hedge. After my baby was born, I used the Yeborinth visualization to remind myself of the same thing during the postpartum challenges that followed.

The Yeborinth parallels a woman’s journey into motherhood, with each of the three sections connected. I will remember this journey as the most important one of my lifetime, as it lead me to my son and transformed me into a mother. Johanna gave me a beautiful stone keepsake from my journey, and I will keep it with me forever to remind me of my strength and the balance of life. After my journey was over, telling the story of my travels was hard. There was so much emotion tied up in the words. But I needed to tell my story, so I decided to tell my story through beads, in a non linear fashion.

This story was told through non linear bead sequence. Each beige bean bead represents a different person involved in Mikko’s birth: Phil, myself, Johanna (midwife/doula), Anu (midwife/doula), Hanna-Mari (midwife at Jorvi Hospital) and my own mama. Each of these beads has an organic symbol reminiscent of a yoni, symbolizing strength and birth. The three cloth beads are made from the shirt I was wearing throughout labor, and while I pushed my baby out. The textures and shapes of these beads, and the larger, smooth, white ones, are symbolic of the labor. Some moments were rough and bumpy, some were smooth and serene. All elements of my
labor story are lying within these beads—you have to listen closely to hear what they have to tell. The black cord is symbolic of the strength of all laboring women who have brought children into this world before me. The green bead is symbolic of the precious life who was birthed into this world like so many green spring buds and blossoms.

My journey into motherhood was the most important journey I’ve made in my life thus far, and the story of my journey was important for me to tell. Telling my story was healing, and I wanted to spread the healing power of storytelling to other mothers. I decided to collect the stories of ten mothers and then translate them into non-linear visual stories to celebrate the mothers’ journeys into motherhood.

The Power of Storytelling

The act of telling the story of one’s journey into motherhood held great power for the mothers I interviewed. A few mothers used the word “therapeutic” to describe the experience of telling their stories, and many remarked that the process was healing and important for them. When a mother has a traumatic transition into motherhood, especially with little or no support, it can take a long time to process the events, and the mother can be filled with sadness and regret for her first months of motherhood. Tania, a mother who had an unplanned cesarean section after 47 hours of labor, said, “I was in a heck of a lot of pain [postpartum] and I had such a hard time letting go.”1 Her birth experience did not happen as she planned it to. She said, “I made a list of the things I

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1 “Interview with Tania, mama of Ukko.” 15:20.
wanted in my birth and none of the things happened (laugh)! These themes came up several times during my interviews with the women. Beatriz said, “I was kind of traumatized. They recommended I go back to the hospital and have a talk with another midwife...For a few months I was so scared of labor, I couldn’t think of having a second baby.” Kim, a mama from Australia, said, “After my first pregnancy I found that I was really traumatized after the birth, so I really needed [Johanna the doula] to talk when I got pregnant the second time, so I, like, totally maxed out her services then (laugh). She’s just such a, you know, caring and beautiful person, so it’s very easy to talk to her.” And before Tania began telling me about her journey through the labyrinth, she said, “I will preface [this part of the story about the labor] by saying I’m still not over it. Like even now I feel like the tears are very close. And I’ve spoken with [a doula] and she’s said it might take a while, it might take a year, for you to sort of get over it, depending on how the labor went.”

Storytelling stepped in as a powerful tool for these mothers who had stories to tell of their experiences, and also for those who would hear the tales of their travels. Storytelling has been a powerful tool for us since the dawn of humanity, and can be used to heal and empower communities in a way that addresses the heart.

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2 “Interview with Tania, mama of Ukko.” Skype interview by author. January 18, 2017. 51:03.
4 “Interview with Kim, mama of Leo and Evan.” Skype interview by author. February 8, 2017. 3:20.
Thriving Communities Empower Women

When women are empowered, entire communities thrive. In Finland, teachers are better supported than most other places in the world through professional development and social support paired with competitive salaries\(^6\), and parents are better supported than most other places in the world through paid leave and excellent social services, which I have learned through the personal experience of having a child in Finland and the data I’ve collected with mothers in my interview pool. As a result, the whole community thrives. Finland has one of the highest rates of working mothers, because mothers are given time to melt into their roles as caregivers rather than being rushed back to work before they’re ready to leave their children. The State of the World’s Mothers annual report in 2013 ranked Finland as the number one place to be a mom.\(^7\)

Since birth and motherhood are a foundation of many women’s lives, it is important for communities to support women in their journeys into motherhood. This is done through access to personalized midwife/doula services for pregnancy, birth and the postpartum period, reasonable paid time away from career when there is a new baby in the family so a mother doesn’t have to choose between a career she loves and being with her new baby, paid parental leave for the partner, and affordable childcare.


In the interviews I conducted with ten mothers from different countries who are all living in Finland, 100% of the interviewed mothers benefited positively from outside, personalized midwife/doula support in some form, either during pregnancy, birth or the postpartum period. Six of the nine mothers hired a doula for support during the entire journey through pregnancy, birth and postpartum. All mothers sought connection to community during the postpartum period, either from attendance to the breastfeeding group “Milky Mornings” at Kätilötalo or postpartum yoga. Half of the mothers sought help from a doula for personalized breastfeeding support after the birth of their child. All mothers expressed value for the chance to share the story of their journeys. All women interviewed are powerful assets to society and community, and should get the support they need.

**The Finnish System Supporting Mothers and Families**

The non-Finnish women I interviewed extolled the virtues of the Finnish system of support, especially if they have had experience with another country’s system. It was natural for women to make comparisons between the Finnish system and their home country’s system, and this often came up during the interviews. Bea, from Spain, said, “In Finland, they don’t body shame you at all” and “I totally trust the system here.” Paula, from Mexico, said, “In Mexico they follow the American model; don’t sleep with your baby, you will suffocate him, but they [in the hospital] taught me there has never been a case of a mother suffocating her child unless she was drunk or high. And it

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8 “Interview with Beatrix, mama of Amaia.” Interview by author. January 16, 2017. 7:06.
9 Beatrix, 10:20.
became normal [to sleep with the baby]." Paula also noted that she has more connection to Finland now, through her experience, and feels more like a foreigner as a mother in her home country. Tania praised the fact that the team at the hospital was all women, and all fluent English speakers and also talked about the top notch service she received through the home clinic, where hospital workers come directly to your home to administer antibiotics, instead of keeping the patient for a longer period of time in the hospital.

Finland has the lowest C-section rate in Europe, at 6.6%. This theme came up several times in the interviews, as women compared the normalcy of and support for natural vaginal birth at the institutional level. Priscilla, from Brazil where C-section births are common and normalized, said, “All my [Brazilian] cousins said I was crazy not to go for the C-section.” In Finland, C-sections are used as a medical procedure when absolutely necessary for the safety of mother and child, and women are given the proper information about the risks associated with the major surgery that it is and corresponding physical recovery time.

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11 Paula, 27:45.
13 Tania, 42:00.
The Ethics of Care and Mothering

Caregivers are the fabric of society, giving sometimes invisible substance to the louder, more glamorous, more easily seen facets who stand upon the carefully woven foundation. Caregivers are our teachers, flight attendants, servers, maids, nurses, midwives, massage therapists, doctors, nannies, and of course, our parents. They patch us up when we skin our knees, take care of our children so we can pursue our careers, clean our homes so we can spend more precious time with our families, bring us food, massage our tired muscles, educate and nurture us. Our caregivers play a pivotal role in our lives, yet their work often goes unacknowledged and undervalued in busy Western cultures. The ethics of care and caregiving is a feminist issue, especially in the context of self care, maternalism, maker culture, and care ethics in technology.

Caregivers are all around us, visible and less visible. Maureen Sander-Straut of the internet encyclopedia of care ethics defines the term as “…‘the ethics of care’ implies that there is moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life. Normatively, care ethics seeks to maintain relationships by contextualizing and promoting the wellbeing of caregivers and care-receivers in a network of social relations.”16 Unfortunately, “promoting the wellbeing” of caregivers is not a top priority in many places.

Self care enables us to keep caring, whether as an activist, artist, midwife or mother. In her BitchMedia article “Audre Lorde Thought of Self Care as an Act of Political Warfare”, Sarah Mirk says:

Several prominent thinkers have pointed out how activism, race, and self-care are connected. In 2014, I saw the legendary social justice activist Angela Davis speak. She ended her talk with a discussion of how activism is different now than it was in the 1960s and 70s. Davis said that the biggest thing she had learned from the youth of today was self-care. ‘Self-care has to be incorporated in all of our efforts. And this is something new,’ she said. ‘This holistic approach to organizing is, I think, what is going to eventually move us along the trajectory that may lead to some victories.’\footnote{Mirk, Sarah. "Audre Lorde Thought of Self-Care as an "Act of Political Warfare." Bitch Media. February 18, 2016. Accessed November 30, 2016. \url{https://bitchmedia.org/article/audre-lorde-thought-self-care-act-political-warfare}.}

The emergency-on-an-aircraft-instructions cliché about putting on your own oxygen mask before helping someone else put on theirs comes to mind when I read Ms. Davis’ words. Reframing and reminding ourselves that self care is, as Audre Lorde says, “an act of political warfare” can help move the act higher on the list of priorities.

Self care in low income communities of color, especially for women who take on the brunt of the caregiving, is often viewed as a luxury unattainable to the average woman. Tina Shoulders saw the need for self care in the community, and created a website called Noire Care to help give other Black women tools to care for themselves. According to Pushblack:
The slogan for Noire Care is: ‘What have you done for you lately?’ This pushes back against the narrative of black women always having to be “strong” for the sake of others. Shoulders also advocates for all Black women to practice self-care: ‘That goes from the sis that works at the strip club, sis in the projects, mama with ‘all the kids with different daddies,’ to the teachers, lawyers, authors, CEOs and execs. We need to define self care as a community that leaves no woman behind regardless of economics or social norms. We need to share resources, affirmations, free yoga workshops, free apps, hair tips, books and conversation around giving ourselves permission to take time for ourselves.\textsuperscript{18}

As Audre Lorde and Angela Davis suggest, self care advocates like Tina Shoulders are helping even the playing field by urging women of color to take time to care for themselves. For mothers in our communities, self care is often a struggle, and this is true moreso for mothers of color and mothers living in low income communities.

**Maternal Power and Changing Societal Roles**

In her writing on maternal power, Julia Kristeva equates motherhood with religious feeling, partly because of the enigma associated with the cycle of feminine fertility and birth. She recognizes that there is a serious lack of focus on “maternal function” compared to “paternal function” in psychoanalysis, and proposes that it is because “maternal function” isn’t as appropriate a descriptor as “maternal passion”. She thinks that pregnancy is overvalued in our modern culture, while maternal passion isn’t recognized as it should be.\textsuperscript{19} Julia Kristeva says:


Here I specifically use the term *maternal passion* in the structural sense of the experience and not just in the biological sense: it is not impossible that through psychoanalysis, self-analysis or sublimating work a woman can also live out her maternal passion without gestation and giving birth (through adoption, surrogate mothers and other fertility techniques to come, or on another level though care-taking, teaching, long-term relationships or in communal/community work).20

Maternal passion is something that drives healthy communities, and should be empowered rather than oppressed. Albeit slowly, the roles of women in modern Western culture is in the midst of a shift.

In her book *The End of Men and the Rise of Women*, Hanna Rosin discusses the changing gender dynamic in modern society and an important shift in gendered power. She says:

> In 2009, for the first time in American history, the balance of the workforce tipped toward women, who continue to occupy around half of the nation’s jobs. (The UK and several other countries reached tipping point a year later.) Women worldwide dominate colleges and professional schools on every continent except Africa. In the United States, for every two men who will receive a BA this year, for example, three women will do the same. Of the fifteen job categories projected to grow the most in the United States over the next decade, twelve are occupied primarily by women.21

According to Rosin's theories and research, we have reached the dawn of a new era unknown to the recorded human history thus far. The “end of men” does not mean we are entering a matriarchal era that parallels the imbalanced patriarchal system, but that we may be entering a time that is more equally balanced in terms of societal structures

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20 "Motherhood Today", Kristeva.
and gender equality. Though Rosin’s research brings feminists hope for the future, we still have a long way to go before the chains of patriarchy are broken.

**Breastfeeding Supports Mothers and Babies**

Nipplephobia in the United States is a cultural shortcoming that continues to oppress the power of women and mothers. In her book *Ina May’s Guide to Breastfeeding*, Ina May describes some particularly disturbing instances of nipplephobia:

I remember, for instance, the Missouri mother who was ticketed for ‘indecent exposure’ for nursing her baby in her car in a far corner of a shopping-mall parking lot in the 1980’s. In another instance, in 2007, a Madison, Wisconsin mother was feeding her young baby in her car in a mall parking lot when she was interrupted by a security guard tapping on her window, telling her, ‘You can’t do that here’.  

Since mothers in the United States can’t count on breastfeeding their children without facing public scrutiny and even legal ramifications, the balance between motherhood and career or personal ambitions are difficult to navigate. Alongside cultural obstacles, there is a lack of palpable support for mothers in the United States. The U.S. only offers 12 weeks of protected leave related to the birth of a child, guaranteeing job security for those who have been employed for at least one year in a company with 50 employees or more.  

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rank in the top 10 for supports given to mothers and families, my country is doing little to improve the lives of mothers.

Breastfeeding mothers have been celebrated through the ages, as evidenced in the countless *Maria Lactans* paintings depicting the Virgin Mary powerfully and publically breastfeeding the christ child. Through public celebration of the breastfeeding mother, perhaps her image could be changed to a positive one once again in the United States.

In Finland there is a wealth of support for breastfeeding mothers. Silvia, Spanish mother of a baby boy living in Finland, can attest to this.

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In Finland, people assume that if you don’t breastfeed, it’s because you can’t, physically. Because you have all this awareness and all this support, that makes it like, why wouldn’t you breastfeed? But in Spain, people don’t breastfeed either because they don’t have the information about how good it is for the mom and the baby, or because they have to go back to work.25

The United States beats Spain in lack of support for new mothers, making it even less likely for a new mom to succeed in breastfeeding her baby for the WHO recommendation of two years.26

This lack of support for mothers creates problems on multiple levels that affect the greater community as a whole. In her book Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace, Sara Ruddick argues that “maternal practice” yields specific kinds of thinking and supports a principled resistance to violence.27 Though this theory attracts criticism, there is truth in Ruddick’s theory that peace can emanate from the fires of mother care and affect the greater community.

Creating Visibility for Marginalized Perspectives

There is a need for the perspectives of marginalized people to be more visible, including the perspectives of women. Dorothy E. Smith writes about the absence of women’s voice and experience from sociological frameworks and structures in The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Methodology.

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Changes in the relationship of researcher and subjects do not resolve the kinds of problems we have been discussing. They are not solutions so long as they are sociological methods of thinking and analysis objectify what our subjects have told us about their lives. We are restricted to the descriptive, to allowing the voices of women’s experience to be heard, unless we can go beyond what our respondents themselves have to tell us.\textsuperscript{28}

Smith’s thoughts in this text can be applied to the need for mother’s perspectives to be more visible in our highly medicalized popular view of birth and motherhood in the Western world.

The empowerment of women in communities can lead to healthier communities as a whole. One way of doing that is to provide financial and emotional support to mothers in the form of government funded programs and the support of a consistent midwife during pregnancy, birth and postpartum. Storytelling and visual art can also work to empower women and make communities healthier.

\textsuperscript{28} Smith, Dorothy E. \textit{The everyday world as problematic: a feminist sociology}. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2010. Pg. 111.
Artists Celebrating Women

The artwork of Niki de Saint Phalle is raw and celebratory in its depiction of large, beautiful female figures called Nanas. Saint Phalle tells a story about women through these sculptures that span time and cultures and celebrates feminine passion in all its glory. The female viewer feels a sense of power, pride and belonging when in the presence of Saint Phalle’s work.

Niki de Saint-Phalle, *The three graces*, 1994, polyester resin painted on rusted steel bas, 66 x 79 x 89 cm

The Women’s Building in San Francisco is a beacon of positive community impact through the empowerment of women. On top of offering practical support and providing a safe place for women in need, The Women’s Building communicates belief
in women through a beautiful community mural that adorns its exterior, so even
passersby can see and feel the powerful belief the community has in its women. The
mural, *MaestraPeace*, was painted by women, for women. The mural is “one of San
Francisco’s largest and best known murals...and serves as a visual testament to the
courageous contributions of women through time and around the world.”

![MaestraPeace Mural located on the Women’s Building in San Francisco, California.](image)

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The Women’s Building is a living, breathing symbol of belief in the women of the Bay Area community, and it works to create a positive impact in the lives of women, and in turn is an investment in the community as a whole.

A fantastic contemporary example of the power of storytelling to empower women is Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler’s plays promoting body positivity and feminine pride as well as creating dialogue about issues that need to be talked about for women and communities to heal, like rape and abuse, have caught on like wildfire in communities all around the world since it first premiered in 1996. The need for women to tell their stories is real and widespread, and people grabbed onto the opportunity Ensler created for them through *The Vagina Monologues*. In the foreword of *The Vagina Monologues*, written by Gloria Steinem, Steinem hails Ensler’s work and the movement it triggered as a way of “moving toward the future”.

But the value of *The Vagina Monologues* goes beyond purging a past full of negative attitudes. It offers a personal, grounded-in-the-body way of moving toward the future. I think readers, men as well as women, may emerge from these pages not only feeling more free within themselves—and about each other—but with alternatives to the old patriarchal dualism of feminine/masculine, body/mind, and sexual/spiritual that is rooted in the division of our physical selves into ‘the part we talk about’ and ‘the part we don’t’.

The Vagina Monologues continues to be a powerful and healing experience for both performers and audience members alike, as well as generating funds for women’s issues on a global scale.

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Another contemporary artist generating healing power for women on a community level is Favianna Rodriguez of Oakland, California. Rodriguez is an interdisciplinary artist, organizer and activist who is making a difference in women’s relationships with their genitalia, self esteem and body image. On her “Pussy Power Imaginary” project, she writes:

The Pussy Power Imaginary, seeks to redefine the pussy as a source of empowerment, a reclamation of agency, and a vehicle to promote self-love while deepening the relationship between women and their own bodies. Recognizing that not all women have pussies, and that every single one can define ourselves beyond the genitalia we are born with, I am attempting to create a space for people to explore the ways in which sex and sexuality is kept in the darkness, while rape culture is normalized and reproductive rights are eroded. In the midst of a war against women, the Pussy Power Imaginary proposes a ‘flipping of the script’ toward positive and authentic depictions of sexual desire, health, choice and freedom. I don’t want to just talk about what we are against, I want to talk about what we are for, and that includes full autonomy over our bodies in every aspect. The existing narratives around sexual justice and sexual health must expand to include a women’s equality that fundamentally begins from within (literally) our bodies. For this reason, I have been creating experimental works and projects around Pussy Power, including these prints.32

Pussy Power, Favianna Rodriguez

Rodriguez continues to dedicate her life to bettering her community and the lives of women through her art, and is a powerful example of empowering women in a community to help the entire community to thrive.

Interviews and Artistic Research

I employed artistic research to investigate how foreign women in Finland birthing their children travel through birth and emerge as mothers, as well as their internal paths as journeying women. Research methodology was qualitative multimethodology as I

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collected data through interviews and storytelling. I looked for both common and non-common denominators in their stories as well as examining the roles of partners, midwives and distant families.

I was honored to hear the stories of multiple mothers during my research process. The mothers I interviewed were from different countries around the globe but living in Finland, each with a unique experience tied together by the distance between their home countries, where much of their community of loved ones still lived. Ten mothers from eight different countries, all living in Finland, were interviewed for this research, as well as one veteran midwife/doula. Interviewees were selected using the snowball method. I also facilitated an interview with myself to include in the data set.
Although my small pool of interviewees makes my data statistically insignificant, it is artistically significant within the context of the visual works that were produced as a result of the women’s interviews and stories. I have identified some common themes that span the stories of the women I interviewed, and visualized the data so others can become familiar with obstacles and supports the women I interviewed experienced as part of their birth journeys.

*Names changed to respect privacy of family
This expressed need to process the labor experience during the postpartum period shows that it is an important factor to consider when providing supports to new mothers. In my small group of interviewees, there was a direct link between the length of time in active labor and a need for postpartum support to process the experience. The six birth experiences that needed postpartum support processing the labor experience has corresponding labor times of 29, 25, 42, 48, 47 and 48 hours. Labor experiences where the mothers did not need postpartum support processing her experience had corresponding labor times of 11, 5, 12, 8, 8, 3.5 and 4 hours. However, even mothers, such as Silvia, who had a relatively short labor experience found it useful to share the story of their experience postpartum, even though it wasn’t a traumatic experience.

Many women I interviewed were surprised by their experience, because it didn’t fit their plans or expectations. Priscilla, who experienced an episiotomy and vacuum intervention during her labor, said, “Nobody tells you those things before. You always have a picture, it's like this: you have contractions, the water breaks, you lie on a bed and he’s out. I’ve never heard of the suction thing until I was there.”\(^{34}\) Many of the journeys took unexpected twists and turns, and it was healing for the women to share these experiences.

A positive theme across the board were the women’s experiences with personalized care from doulas and midwives. In cases where the mother did not hire an

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\(^{34}\) “Interview with Priscilla*, mama of Oskar*.” Interview by author. January 24, 2017.
outside doula for support, positive experiences were still had through hospital midwives within the Finnish hospitals. Silvia ended up having just four hours of labor, and managed to birth her son naturally. Of the midwife support she received in Jorvi Hospital, she said, “She sat me down on a ball and put my head on Stephen’s lap, and helped my breathing. And the pain went from really strong pain, like me needing an epidural, to me being able to cope with the contractions and not needing the epidural.”

Silvia’s experience illustrates the great power that lies in woman to woman support during labor.

Midwives and Doulas Supporting Mothers’ Journeys

Doula support was another positive theme in the experiences of the women I interviewed. Johanna Sarlio-Nieminen was the doula for many of the women I interviewed, and she was also my own doula and midwife. My labor experience and first postpartum week were potentially traumatizing, and her support made all the difference in me viewing my labor experience as empowering and positive, which has a tremendous impact on the rest of my life and choices I will make surrounding the birth of another child, if I choose to have another. The women who had support from her, or another doula, couldn’t talk about their birth experience without mentioning the profound impact of feeling supported during this vulnerable time. Noemi said, “Johanna is gentle and really caring with everyone, and that really helped me.” Paula said that when

Johanna started coming, she “felt so safe.” Paula’s own mother had already passed away before her pregnancy, and she said Johanna was “like a sherpa that carried you. Like a substitute mother.” Tania said her doula “would come around every Thursday and we would have tea and talk about the birthing process and she would massage me, and that was really nice. And when we got back from the hospital she just brought bags of food for us. It was so kind.” As in any journey, a guide can make the difference between the traveler getting lost among the hedges and making the most of an exciting journey. Doulas are excellent guides for women journeying into motherhood, during any and/or all stages of that journey.

Johanna has been practicing midwifery for over 20 years, and has practiced her craft in the Finnish hospital system, in Africa, and as a homebirth midwife. She has a wealth of experience that speaks for itself through the women and babies she serves. A mother who has benefited from the support a doula/midwife like Johanna offers can’t help but talk about the support she felt. Kim, from Australia, says, “I was very happy to have the doula there, because between the three of us it was very, like, there were a lot of highs but there were a lot of lows...our doula was really good at keeping the great atmosphere.” Maintaining a good labor environment, as well as reminding the mother of her own power, are some of the great benefits a doula has to offer.

37 “Interview with Paula, mama of Hugo.” Skype interview by author. February 1, 2017. 30:40.
39 “Interview with Kim, mama of Leo and Evan.” Skype interview by author. February 8, 2017. 11:00.
During my interview with Johanna about her experience of supporting women in their journeys, my own labor experience came up. Johanna said, “You were your primitive self. You knew everything. But you needed to feel safe.” During my labor, Johanna frequently reminded me of my power while shielding me from any disturbances to my environment, which are some of the biggest reasons why I can say my labor experience was a positive one.

Johanna has walked alongside many women in their Yeborinth journeys into motherhood. Of her experience as a co-traveler in the first labyrinth of pregnancy, she says:

It’s like what you are trying to do now. Instead of having the systematic, randomized trial, you create a space, and sit down, and just listen. And I think this is why this should be the core element of teaching midwives in general because we really need to sit down and hear the story. Whoever and whatever time, but, make space for it, and sometimes you can hear the very little that should make you even sharper...The first labyrinth for me is learning to hear, but at the same time also to give my presence in a way that the mother to whom i’m attending is finding her own wishes.

Storytelling has its place of power even for the midwives and doulas who are supporting women on their journeys. They help us heal, and learn, and grow, and connect, in a way that sits well not only in the mind, but in the hands, and in the heart.

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40 “Interview with Johanna, midwife and doula.” Interview by author. February 5, 2017. 26:00.
41 Johanna, 8:30.
Visual Stories of the Journeying Mother

The following images and paired text are the production part of this MA thesis project. They are the result of my in depth interviews with the mothers, in which I interpreted the stories I grew to know well, after re-listening and analyzing what each mother had to say. Each piece was created using linoleum block relief printing on handmade rice paper, and was presented to the mother as a souvenir of her journey after the culminating exhibition.
Beatriz’s journey into being Amaia’s mama turned her own color from blush to a rich lavender, to match her daughter’s color. Her deep, dark, azure partner, Alejandro, supported her journey through each part of the Yeborinth. Being foreigners, far from practical support of friends and family, they only had each other. Beatriz’s labor journey was sanguine scarlet, and full of unexpected bends and barriers. Her labor journey was the same length as her pregnancy, although the buoyant, coral paths of the pregnancy
were smoother. Her months of navigating the smaller postpartum maze were plated by its lustrous, virescent hedges, dripping with new life. 42

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Tandem paths, years apart, paved Ina’s journey into mamahood of Alba and Luana. She emanates the green/blue hue of water, which takes on the color of what is reflected in it.

Her first journey, already melding and shaping who she is as a mother, sent echoes forward while she became a mother for the second time. The illusory nature of a woman’s first pregnancy is absent from this increasingly deepening turquoise maze towards Luana, and the experienced momentum of Ina’s second pregnancy journey guided her forward quietly while her busy life demanded the spotlight. As the time for birth approached, Ina had confidence in her body. She knew that she could do it. She trusted herself. The labyrinth of labor dressed in vivid cerise, and Ina traveled through it with her family and two loving midwives surrounding her, in the comfort of her own home. Dani, Ina’s indigo partner and her first daughter, bright orange, helped welcome another strong, active little girl into the family: Lua, blazing cadmium yellow. The longest journey for Ina was the trip through the postpartum warren, which was woven with the many colors of a rainbow.43

43 “Interview with Ina, mama of Alba and Lua.” Interview by author. February 1, 2017.
Paula’s journey into motherhood was heralded by long anticipation of her pregnancy. Her color is orange, in a multitude of shades. When she finally arrived and entered her pregnancy maze, she was surrounded by the unknown, and the beginning of her journey was defined by fear. Her partner, Teemu, lime green, journeyed beside her, but with the absence of an extended network of family, she sought a substitute mother. A sherpa for her journey. And she found Johanna, doula extraordinaire, who brought a feeling of safety with her. Paula’s wine red labor journey stretched and sprawled, until
she finally found Hugo, her golden ray of sunshine. They moved forward together onto her postpartum path, which was the largest maze yet, and drenched in the warm hue of milky egg nog.44

Kim’s Journey

Kim, a mama who emanates yellow warmth, had done this before. Her first journey through the Yeborinth took unexpected turns, and she needed time to heal from the journey before she traveled again with her partner, Jukka, who is a beautiful greeny blue. Each of her pregnancy labyrinths carried muted cool tones, absent of gloss. Her first labor maze that led her to her strong, bright, red, Leo, was large, awkward and grotesque. It was a tawny, stormy journey tainted with a cooling hint, which carried into the largest maze of her postpartum months. With Evan, a cool, calm, beautiful, bright turquoise, her labor journey was vibrant and warm, and she felt how powerful she was.

The postpartum months after he was born had an equally nice energy, and was the brightest path of all her labyrinths.45

45 “Interview with Kim, mama of Leo and Evan.” Skype interview by author. February 8, 2017.
Silvia is a mama radiating water color. Her journey through the Yeborinth was traveled with her earthy red partner and soft, peach stepdaughter. The pregnancy journey was the smallest of her paths, and coated in the dark colors of autumn. The immense labor maze was intense and swift, carrying her along in a carmine torrent. When it became too intense, a midwife helped bring her back to her breath, and she found the strength to continue. It was here she met her radiant, sunshiney Robert Joe. They walked
together harmoniously into her calm, balanced postpartum maze that tooted the many colors of nature and the pulse of life.46

Elena’s Journey

46 "Interview with Silvia, mama of Robert Joe." Interview by author. November 16, 2016.
Elena’s pair of paths were trekked through with her partner, pastel yellow, and devoted doula. This mama is a strong, bright ruby who planned her first journey, but was surprised by the second. Her elder son is the color of the sky, and kept her busy during her second pregnancy journey, which was her smallest maze. The labor journey towards her peach colored Evan was a brilliant crimson that matched the intensity of the natural birth. It was painful, but so fulfilling to bring her baby into this world with the power of her own body. Her postpartum maze as a mama of two boys was the color of emeralds, and the largest of all her journeys.47

47 “Interview with Elena, mama of Ethan and Evan.” Skype interview by author. February 24, 2017.
Noemi’s first maze through pregnancy felt eternal. Its violet path stretched on, and on, and on. Noemi bares all the colors of the rainbow, depending on her different feelings from day to day. Her light green labor maze was comparatively small, and it wasn’t long before she had journeyed through it to meet her sweet, creamy Bianca with her partner, cloaked in bright yellow, by her side. Her postpartum labyrinth was a vivid vermillion
journey that she walked through with the support of her loving doula, partner, and her own mother to support her.⁴⁸

Tania’s Journey

Tania’s blissful, tawny-rose pregnancy journey was the size of a penny farthing compared to the mahogany bicycle wheel of her raw, passionate, painful labor maze, and a postpartum journey even more gargantuan than the labor that flashed a bright neon lime green that flashed her awake into motherhood. She is the color of yellow ochre, whose hue has gathered depth and syrupy richness throughout her trek into motherhood. She learned to surrender during her journey, and that if she did so willingly her path became easier to travel. Her partner is a strong, royal blue, and he stood by her side and supported her throughout all her travels. The road to meeting her sweet, strong, cardinal-red Ukko was long, but so worth the moment she got to see his amazing little face for the first time.⁴⁹

Priscilla’s journey was a rollercoaster of challenges, with good moments, and hard moments. She is a peaceful, ivory mama who found tranquility along her journey, especially after meeting her Oskar, born in the color of new life. Her partner kept a calm blue of support during her travels. Her pregnancy maze was the smallest of the three, and was a calm blue, like her partner. The intensity of her labor maze was glaring crimson, and was the same size as the paths composing her postpartum maze. Her
postpartum maze was a colorful mesh of her previous journeys, containing both moments of calm and intensity.\textsuperscript{50}

\textit{Melanie’s Journey}

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\textsuperscript{50} “Interview with Priscilla*, mama of Oskar*.” Interview by author. January 24, 2017.
Melanie is a mama whose colors shift through varying intensities of yellow: tangerine, ochre, cream, canary, primrose. Her pregnancy journey started out dark and murky, but lightened into a peachy lemonade pink, full of hope and optimism. Her hunter green partner stood by her side with their papaya orange midwife as she was ushered into the lavender labor labyrinth cut with deep brown and bright red amidst the lush bounty of a Finnish summer, the sound of rain filling the home where she hoped to birth her child. Her dear Mikko was born on the eve of midsummer, carrying all the colors of summer and life in his heart. Her postpartum labyrinth was ivory cream with flashes of jarring, bright colors dotting its paths like confetti.
Johanna’s Yeborinth
Johanna has been through the Yeborinth time and time again, as she acts as a support for journeying women becoming mothers. The first labyrinth is quiet. It is a place to listen. It is the most important place for her as a midwife, because it is where she sits and learns to hear. In the second labyrinth, she helps the laboring woman be her primitive self. She is there to act as a shield for the mama, and to put forth protective measures for women to find their voice, their bodies. And when they need help, to do it in a way that still feels like it belongs to the mother. This second maze is the biggest part of the journey for her. When she was a fresh midwife in the hospital, she couldn’t believe she wasn’t going home with the families as they entered their postpartum labyrinth, but now that she has been born again as an independent midwife who co-travels with mothers for hospital and home births, she is able to continue walking alongside the women she serves as they melt into motherhood.

The Interview Process and Exhibition

The visual stories I’ve created to tell the journeys of each mother was the production part of my MA thesis project, informed by the in depth interviews. The interviews with the women were raw, genuine collections of the women’s beautiful stories. An intimacy between the two of us, usually as our children played nearby or breastfed while we talked in person or over Skype, allowed for a true flow of the stories. The opportunity to hear, hold, and translate the stories from these journeying women was a great honor, and an artwork in and of itself.
All visual stories were showcased in Kätilötalo at a joint exhibition between Johanna Sarlio-Nieminen and myself on the fifth of May, which was also the International Day of Midwives. The exhibition also served as a storyshare workshop for mothers in the community. Mothers and midwives were invited to share stories verbally in the space, to grow, celebrate and heal as a community. Each mother who generously shared her journey with me received the original artwork her story was translated into, to complete the celebration of her paths traveled into motherhood.

**Creation of the Visual Stories**

Creating visuals of the stories I collected and held in my heart was a difficult process for me as an artist. I’ve never had such little control over the color scheme of a work, and I’ve never worked solely with representative elements coming together to tell a story. For many of the pieces I created draft upon draft before deciding on a composition I felt portrayed the true essence of the mother’s journey. The translucent and ethereal qualities of the rice paper received the stories well, and will tell them proudly as they hang, with any passing breeze blowing life into the two dimensional storytellers.
Above: planning arrangement of shapes for Paula’s story

Below: Drying stories on rice paper
Above: Mapping out color placements for mama stories

As an artist, I wanted the works to be pleasing to look at. As a storyteller, I wanted the works to accurately portray the breadth of emotion that go into a woman’s journey into motherhood. In some instances, I sacrificed beauty for reality. Not all parts of these journeys are easy and beautiful, and I wanted the visuals to accurately represent this reality while still being something the mother could look at with love and pride.
The mothers were the first to see the works. The reactions I received from them made this whole project worthwhile, when I could see they felt seen, heard, and celebrated for the journeys they had traveled.

**The First Storyshare Workshop for Mamas - May 5, 2017**

*OBJECTIVE: To create a space for mothers to connect, heal, and grow through the power of storytelling. Positive impact on women has a ripple effect that will positively affect their families, friends and communities.*

**Story Workshop 1: 11-12:30**

11-11:15: Settle into the space

11:15-11:20 Introduce story share

11:20-11:40

10 min partner story share

*In pairs, women have 10 mins to share part of their story of the journey into motherhood, using a provided prompt to help women narrow down topic. After 10 mins, we switch and the other woman shares.*

11:40-12:10 (Each storyteller has MAX 7 minutes plus three minutes of transition between the storytellers)

**STORYTELLER 1:** Paula Bello  
**STORYTELLER 2:** Ina Fiebig  
**STORYTELLER 3:** Noemi Ferraris

12:12-12:30 Look at artwork, transition out
12:30-2pm Open community time. Pumpkin soup, look at artwork, talk

**Story Workshop 2: 2-3:30**

2:00-2:15: Settle into the space

2:15-2:20 Introduce story share

2:20-2:40
10 min partner story share

*In pairs, women have 10 mins to share part of their story of the journey into motherhood, using a provided prompt to help women narrow down topic. After 10 mins, we switch and the other woman shares.*

2:40-3:10 (Each storyteller has MAX 6 minutes plus two minutes of transition between the storytellers)

**STORYTELLER 1:** Silvia Padron Revilla

**STORYTELLER 2:** Tania Moilanen

**STORYTELLER 3:** Reetta Ranta

3:10-3:30 Look at artwork, transition out

3:30-5pm Open community time. Pastries and snacks, look at artwork, talk
MA/MA GALLERY OF (CON)TEMPORARY ART PRESENTS:

MATERNAL JOURNEYS AND THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

MAY 5, 2017 11:00-17:00

Storyshare Workshop for Mamas

with Visual Stories by Melanie Popp and Photography by Johanna Sarlio-Niimenen

Storyshare Workshop 1: 11am-12:30pm
Storyshare Workshop 2: 2pm-3:30pm
Open Community times from 12:30-2pm and 3:30-5pm

HOUSE OF MIDWIVES
4 Kajanuksenkatu
HELSINKI, 00250
Moving Forward

This project was a starting point for something that I hope to continue. Though I am unable to scientifically quantify the positive community impact created through listening to and translating the important journeys of these mothers, I can tell it was significant through the evidence of reactions from the mamas. They felt heard, and seen, and important. The process brought some closure and celebration to a journey that could be the most important of all their lives. Especially mamas who have a difficult time traveling through any or all of the three labyrinths, having a space to share and heal in strength and celebration can have a significant impact on her life.

I will begin the next chapter of this project when I return to the United States to live, where woman to woman, personalized support during this journey into motherhood is far less common, therefore creating a larger need for postpartum support. The power of storytelling will continue to act as a tool for celebrating and sharing the stories of these maternal journeys that are moving us all forward.
Bibliography

"Interview with Priscilla*, mama of Oskar.*" Interview by author. January 24, 2017.
"Interview with Elena, mama of Ethan and Evan.*" Skype interview by author. February 24, 2017.
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"Interview with Johanna, midwife and doula." Interview by author. February 5, 2017.
"Interview with Kim, mama of Leo and Evan." Skype interview by author. February 8, 2017.
"Interview with Paula, mama of Hugo." Skype interview by author. February 1, 2017.
"Interview with Silvia, mama of Robert Joe." Interview by author. November 16, 2016.


*Names changed to protect privacy of family