

House of Complaints

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Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's "normal" state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity?

– Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

It's hot and my skin feels like a leathery patchwork: patch patch, stitch stitch. I'm tired of complaining about my physical state, especially as this is kind of the best part, when the baby's stretching in the belly is strong and defined. "I'm coming!" they seem to tell you with each passing day in that final month of gestation. It is temporary, this phase of discomfort between reveling in the big baby in the belly and the largeness of oneself. Barring a few who recently entered the post-partum realm, most friends listen to me with half an ear, knee deep in toddler or pre-tween or tween complaints. "Yes, shame... I remember that. Yes, it's so hot! Stay hydrated, friend!" These are the women, the ones who have given birth recently.

They can no longer quite remember the distinct feeling of a body so alien to oneself, yet, at the same time, so unmistakably one's own. Men who are fathers look at me as though I'm fully alien. My limbs feel put together like a rag doll's, but weightier. I take many pictures of myself, especially while doing yoga in the mornings. I do this to remember later... what I looked like, what I felt like. I'm dressed in underwear and a pink crop top I've decided will be my birthing top. I tell my husband this too, in case, come that day,

I don't know what to do and, like before, I forget about everything but the surges of the baby making its way out. When I look back at photos of previous labours (two to be precise), I'm always a little appalled by the state of my tits, and so, make a special point of being a little less 'wild birthing mother with poop and baby at the same time' and more modest, 'aware, breathe the baby out, less poop, in-labour mother'. Beaten boobs, now misshapen, hang saggy and malformed, but not when I wear the pink crop top – a 90s throwback and a refined, mother of three, got-my-shit-together look. Tick, I think to myself.

Still, I feel elephant-like – large and ouch ouch pinched together skin all over, especially my legs and feet. Nine months, including the ninth month... so ten months. Ten months out of twelve – that's a long time to carry a person. I'm unsure whose body this is, yet I know it is mine. In truth, I don't even know whose mind this is anymore – it's shaky and neurotic; full, yet empty. All I seem to do, it seems, is live in the wake of the previous day, the day before – its small, banal achievements, its humongous, joyful laughs at nothing, its discoveries which I could not have imagined would've enticed me before: a life before children. Before... a place of longing for the past, a longing for a me who is gone. Not dead, just gone, like those mothers in the novel *Elsewhere* who just disappear in the middle of the night. The townspeople stand around and watch the family who has lost their mother, but nobody really grieves. Perhaps I'll return but forevermore differently shaped, smelling, feeling. This body is a war-torn shell, a place bereft of nameable freedoms; yet it is free with sanguine beauty – a smile, a small laugh, a stolen sweetie like my Ma Cecily used to give me, those ones with the love words. I think of the love words on those powdery sweeties now as I write this, and I imagine them in a grave with her... with my MaCeci. I remember her face, whispering softly as she handed one, then another to me, and the taste of first the powder coming off, then the words. The whole ritual was so mystical, so magical to me. Thinking back, I imagine, to her, it was just a packet of sweeties. While in this body I think of how much I hold in my body, besides this tiny human, of course. I remember all those memories, I rememory them. I promise myself I'll find the powder, love words, sweeties for my lot too. But I'm not a Ma, I'm a mum and that's a whole other thing.

I find my love words in Mother.Lab, a research project I started in 2018, but only named when the physical space came to life in June 2022^[1]. Mother.Lab is a physical and abstract laboratory in which to think through, curate, write about, explore, and expand on the complexity of caring for children, specifically through the gaze and experiences of mothers. While the space is open to the more expansive notion of parenting, it is also quite defiantly about mothering and mothers and how they become mothers. It is an ongoing project that centralises intimacy and person-making as valuable, seen labour. Its call is to begin to house and archive, and capture what mothering looks like in an ongoing personal and collaborative format.

From a personal perspective this means photographing my family, myself in pregnancy and postpartum phases of my life, writing about these vast

[1] Please see www.motherlab.me for more about Mother.Lab and to lay a complaint or to make an appointment to come in person.

experiences, and thinking with and about and through them as fluid, as challenging, as joyful, as recreation, as serious, as work, as slog, as grief, as blind, as light. Mothering informs my research and, since the inception of Mother.Lab, is the core of my research and the place from which it expands and grows.

Mother.Lab is an acknowledgement that care work is intimate and theoretical. Mothering, as the project suggests, is a more useful term, which the nouns Mother or motherhood don't quite capture. Mothering is also a verb, a word and act in motion, embracing its service-oriented approach. It is a constant curation of a series of performances of oneself, some which you know and some which are consistently new and unearthed in fast moments of the everyday. To this end, Mother.Lab prefaces the unnoticed or seemingly unimportant textures of the experiences of mothering. Some of these are: objects acquired, such as toys that take on new lives, sounds that become words or noise, relationships that have no shape for years and then suddenly there's a bond that is unmatched. Mother.Lab is a global South-based project, started because of my personal and vested interest in Black feminist literature and practices. Since becoming a mother, I wanted to know (and continue to try to learn) how one is always a feminist and a mother. This intersectional experience seems to be a commonplace quagmire reflected in ways of being a mother in general.

The project, Mother.Lab, seeks to play with the different parts of a seemingly singular identity. Every year Mother.Lab seeks to take on a large theme under which multiple creative curated experiences take shape. These themes are informed by research and theory. They are part of producing but most importantly, showing, embodied forms of knowledge, emphasising what we know from within and what we know and learn from previous generations. Mother.Lab is inspired by theoretical work around intimacy and affect. At the time of being loaned a studio in Ferreirasdorp, Johannesburg, to house this work, Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* was uppermost in my mind, particularly as I had been thinking through how mothers do not complain and how they do not feel like they are allowed to complain. Complaint, it seemed to me, was a good starting point from which to unravel the complications of mothering. This is how I came to name the first theme for Mother.Lab: the 'House of Complaints'.

Here is an excerpt from the first version of the invitation I sent to mothers to come to Mother.Lab for House of Complaints:

Dear Friends, Colleagues, Collaborators and fellow caregivers,

I know most of you in a personal capacity – some through work, some are very close friends and I love witnessing your lives, family, colleagues, teachers and collaborators in different capacities. Many of you are mothers but some of you are not, yet I know you practise care and labour in your homes, your teaching capacities/spaces, your interactions in the world, your extended family duties. I come to the project as a mother of colour

but also as a teacher/ facilitator, member of a school community – I am always also Black, also woman and mother... many hats. I've been mulling it over for years now, this idea that care work is heavy work – in many ways it always has been – yet, with COVID-19 the gaze was cast so firmly on the home, on households and on how they function and on who makes many households function.

Starting Mother.Lab has been a long time project of hope and love in my mind! It is a project – a space and a set of ideas I wish to play with, work with and grapple with in relation to mothering, care spaces and people and the difficulties and joys of such labour. This work, as we all know, is ongoing, trying and often so much goes not only unseen but also unheard, un-listened to and unprocessed - especially for mothers. For the children, in an era that demands such close vigilance, we read, accommodate, drive, strive and work 'for' our children to help them become the best versions of themselves. We have never been more aware of our parenting than we are right now: race, transformation, gender identities, helicopter parenting, hands-off parenting, labour choices, access to labour choices – these are all huge huge topics and I've found it can all be overwhelming. These, among others, are part of a series of concerns of the larger project, Mother.Lab.

In the first iteration of this project, a Joburg, global South-based project, I wish to host a House of Complaints – this is a space for (mainly) diverse mothers but also queer, single-dad caregivers, and other variations of people who care for children. I am looking for mothers young, old, new, not so new, whatever your version is, I'm here for it and would love to hear your version/your complaint – it can be big or small, about a tantrum this morning or about labouring and birth for hours/days.

I invite you to bring your complaint, whatever it might be... a way you're personally unseen, un-registered, un-cared for in the face of caring for others. This is complex work and sometimes moments so deeply buried inside us under the guise of what is beautiful and fun and special about care work... Sometimes we forget how little of ourselves we allow ourselves to 'be'.

I want to create a space for these complaints to live a life beyond your mind. I draw heavily on Sara Ahmed's work in 'Complaint' and seeing/ using complaint as a method.

...

For now, thanks for reading this! Thanks for considering participating. Bring your kids along, don't if you don't want to... the space is not fixed or serious or formal.

The space continues for as long as complaints live.

18 July 2022 (Dee Marco)

In 2022 The House of Complaints became the platform that enabled Mother.Lab to unpack, engage with, and complicate issues around mothering.

House of Complaints is a series of curated acts that take place in the studio loaned to me: first, I invited mothers; many mothers or people who care intimately for their own children or children they thought of as their own, to gather at the space whenever they could. Women would come once, unless they desired to write a new complaint or edit an initial complaint. To date, none have returned yet but many promised they would. Secondly, mothers engaged with me about the invitation, often wanting to know whether they should dress up, prepare a speech, talk to others, or bring their children. The space of the House itself was relatively empty and coming to it hinged on a single request, which was that each person bring a complaint. They are asked to write down their complaint. In the writing, I invite them to sit and contemplate what they wish to have 'seen' about their own mothering journey.

Some simply bring their stories to the light of day, setting minor daily irritations free on the page, like a bird taking flight. Some enjoy the process of writing; they scribble fast and with intention. Sometimes, unexpectedly, the ink taunts them with disappearing words on a page as a pen dries in an unanticipated fit of something akin to rage; nothing short of spectacular prose coming to a different kind of life. But these words that adorned a prefab wall from June to November of 2022 were not just made-up stories, they were the truths of these women and so, the complaints became part of the house, structurally adorning its walls and making it into something to name. The House became the house with each woman's visit ending with them placing their story on the wall. The House itself didn't quite resemble a house proper and much of how it came together was haphazard, furnished as it was with spill-overs from my home: a couch, a dresser, a pouffe, a table with a tablecloth, a small mat, a large mat. The intention is for it to become a curated reflection of my own house.

Safety is taken seriously here, as something to be considered so that those who come feel they are able to place their complaints on the wall. This placement is both deeply personal, as well as a distinctly public and performative act. Often, I accept the complaint. I have a look at the wall. Sometimes we discuss where to place it; sometimes I do the placing, sometimes the writer places it herself. This is a public act. A further public act is that I request two photographic moments of the women. The first photograph is a digital one which can be edited and the second is a polaroid photograph which, along with the words, is posted to the wall immediately. This is a further series of performative acts; to place not only the complaint but also a photograph, means to attach an identity to the words.

Most times the women have wanted their photos to accompany their complaints but sometimes they haven't. Some women have wanted their words up, but haven't signed their names and have said they didn't want

to put their faces up. In these instances, I've asked for permission to put the photo up alone or to attach it to another written complaint where the author also wished to remain anonymous. How mysterious, I feel, to have these complaints be so deeply personal yet, at the same time, so much in communion with others, so interchangeable. How intriguing that the complaints begin to care for each other, looking out for one another, having each other's backs.

The wall becomes an interesting and complex way of curating these women's stories, whatever they name as their realities: one that is immediate and written, so there's an analogue quality about it, and another that is photographed and can enter a digital and technological space where the words, images and thus meanings can be changed, distorted, erased or made different.

I sent invitations to women to come to the space. Initially it was sent by email to friends, colleagues, collaborators, friends of friends, and those in and around Johannesburg. The message also changed over the months, sometimes growing longer or shorter, sometimes with more or less information in it. It became a WhatsApp message; it took on new media forms, always centralising mothering, complaint as a complex thing, and an openness – in itself, I am learning – a provocation to mothers. To complain is to say something is uncomfortable, or wrong, or not ok. To complain is to counter what mainstream society says it means to mother. Complaint, in motherhood, needs to centralise and consistently engage a story, one comprised of both memory (how we create and perceive our own past stories) and the present (how we create and perceive our own stories now). There is no absolute truth in mothering lives, an irony that is not lost in the context of the laboratory.

Here is Ahmed's quote that made me reach out for the studio space that found me in June 2022:

Who is heard as complaining? A hearing can be a judgment. A hearing can be a history. We can turn to the archives of Black feminism to hear how that judgment has a history. In one instance, Lorene Cary (1991), a working-class African American woman, is writing about her mother: "I always saw it coming. Some white department-store manager would look at my mother and see no more than a modestly dressed young black woman making a tiresome complaint. He'd use that tone of voice they used when they had important work elsewhere. Uh-oh. Then he'd dismiss her with his eyes. I'd feel her body stiffen next to me and I'd know that he'd set her off" (58). Cary "always saw it coming." She has come to know her mother's reactions; she can feel them as they happen. Earlier she describes how her mother had "studied" the "rich white people" she'd worked for, as her mother's mother had done before, and how Cary "studied" her mother (57). To study her mother is to learn what sets her off, the "rich white people," store managers, employers, who dismiss her as a "modestly dressed young black woman making a tiresome complaint." Cary can hear and see it

herself: the “tone of voice they used,” how he would “dismiss her with his eyes.” She can also hear her mother hear it, see her mother see it. Cary shows how Black feminist knowledge can be passed down as intimacy with bodily reactions. (Ahmed, p.2)

Lorene Cary’s piece (1991) quoted by Ahmed coincides with Kimberle Crenshaw’s foundational piece on intersectionality (1991), which has become so instructive in recent years again in conceptualising and activating feminist and Black social protests around the world. Cary notes something important that inspires Mother.Lab and House of Complaints: firstly, that mothers are worth being studied; they’re worthy research subjects and secondly, that intimacy is complex. As Ahmed notes, Black feminist knowledge is stored in our bodies, our mothers’ bodies, and in bodily actions and reactions. While I do not impose any racial exclusions when mothers bring their complaints, I keep in mind that mothers hold different cultural and racial and personal historical sensibilities in their bodies. I am interested in how these, too, form part of their complaints; both those they write down and those they don’t.

House of Complaints grew in ways I could not have imagined, and I anticipate more as it continues into 2023. Much of the growth was in relation to time, navigating the city, and childrens’ schedules. For a few months the studio was filled with mothers, often two or three at a time. They’d come, stand around confused, and then, once they understood that I didn’t expect anything of them except for them to sit with themselves and their words, they’d let loose! Many ended up having long conversations with each other; complaints became multiple, complex, abstract and even fantastical. Sometimes visits were brief, chucked in among a list of things on a weekend morning: children’s parties, shopping, doctors’ appointments, drinks with girlfriends, etc. Sometimes visits were long and I found myself checking my watch, tracking my own children’s whereabouts, or absentmindedly rubbing my growing belly, wondering about the impending birth of my baby girl. I remember a specific visit with another pregnant mother and how we eventually just sat for hours, long after her complaint had been written, her photo had been hung, and the hot wings she had brought were hot bones only. The scent lingered in the air, and I remember wondering if the cloying smell of 5-hour-old fried chicken would greet the neighbouring artist the next day when they came to work. I did not have a kettle in the space, but I have already purchased one for the new space. The ability to share food and drink seems integral to the work of building, person-ing and simply being in the complexity of the work of allowing. This, I realised with each passing week, is what the complaints were – they made allowances through a series of unformulated visits and experiences for becoming something worth seeing, looking at and reading... And they are the most unbecoming products, complaints.

The months also reflect a series of WhatsApp messages to schedule and reschedule, which took the form of a forgotten something or other during the school term time, a sick child, the holidays, a wedding, a funeral. It was also so distinctly marked by school holiday time and a quiet, an ‘awayness’

that made it impossible for some to come without their children. I never insisted that the children be left behind, but many wanted to come alone, as though their complaints and the children simply could not live in the same place. Mothering schedules proved to be laboratories of their own. Many mothers apologised profusely, always via text –

“I’m so sorry I can’t make it... Thato woke up throwing up.”

Another writes: “I’m so tired...”

A few hours later she follows up with what’s been happening in her house: a sick cycle, a depressed husband, an ailing mother, a miscarriage. I repeat that there is no need to apologise. I am consistently reminded – by the ways these women tend to their good manners and sense of morality for showing up messy or not at all – that patriarchy reigns and that women are expected to remain in a position of service, forever giving selflessly. Other similar narratives of survival and loss appear in my inbox and WhatsApps over the months.

The December school holidays have ended and the throbbing in all parts of my body has become normal. I ask myself if I can name what this is – is it a pain? Is it a joyful sigh that simply resonates differently to how it did before? Is it a queer unbecoming, a misrecognition even? I ache for a different sense of self, even just to see her, that former, once-upon-a-time-self. To smell what I can only now describe as freedom, would hold me in good stead for the heady days ahead – nappies, showers, sitting upright while sleeping. The days blur from one into the next without name, without real shape – like when there’s a death, life stops for you but nobody else. The cars keep going on school runs, the twitchy twenties crowd (teenagers really) keep getting pissed and walking home, singing loudly outside my bedroom window. The Ubers keep coming and going and riding and delivering, and fetching and feeding. Only my days change. For everyone else, life continues and expands and contracts along with the days. I read extensively on motherhood, which helps me very little. Theoretically, I understand it as a changing phase, a series of expansions, of myself and the children. But I don’t see myself. I haven’t seen myself in years... seven years, to be precise. Either that, or I keep changing; I, like my children, am a changing vessel.

To complain is also to embody a sense of self that one wants someone else to see, a part of oneself one wants to have recognised as difficult, as worth naming hard. I ask myself if I may complain about each of my children but do I really find their lives, so entangled and caught up in mine, to be ‘unsatisfactory’/‘unacceptable’? On the contrary, I find their lives to be most profound and my pushing them out equally so. My laboured through and labouring body, my unfixable, fuzzy memory, my messy mind and my ill-curated logic remind me I am also not me. Perhaps I am what is to be complained about.

Auto-theory
Auto-pivot
Auto

Ahmed complicates the toil that is complaint (complaining = active present participle, happening now and ongoing). Ahmed teaches us that the things we think make up a complaint are assumed straightforward, when in fact they are anything but. Ahmed offers a most alluring provocation, which is that complaints can be methods (complaint = a verb, a doing). In this way, I feel a freedom in wanting to complain, in wanting to attend to a series of thoughts about what is supposed to be the happiest time of your life, as workable, as unfixed and thus, not restraining, not imprisoning, not misrecognition. Complaint can thus do more than simply mention or note what is already there and name it difficult; complaint can allow for agency, for choice. To use complaint as method is to allow oneself to be studied, either by children or self or other mothers, and for them to access those embodied intimacies in new, perhaps even unguarded ways.

House of Complaints came to life because of these ruminations and because of the dull profundity of care work – so banal, so seemingly meaningless and unaccomplished. In knowing this is not true, not really the case, that mothering is not meaningless, the ongoing project seeks to curate and capture these complaints and have them reflect back at the women who wrote them and others who keep coming to the space. In addition, the House keeps changing and will travel. In a world that registers value as productivity and employs very specific measures of success, I looked around and felt there was no value placed on seeing, let alone documenting, these mundanities for and with these care workers. I chose mothers because as a method this resonated with and for me doing this work too. These complications felt fair to wrap into the structure of a house – a safe space from which to be oneself, safe being the emphasis. But homes are not always safe for mothers – they're noisy, they're messy, they're triggering spaces. Before children, home might've been a reprieve itself – among other normalcies: long, romantic book reading tides, punctuated only by breaks for a beverage – a choice in itself.

Keguro Macharia's crisp, clear and powerful writing has been giving me strength and hope over the past year. "We write for people", explains Macharia in a workshop on writing. I never feel 'spoken at' when reading their work. "I've made it my priority to build an archive of texts with which to think", they write. I draw on this concept as I look for ways to describe and explore the idea of the House. I learn of Macharia's similar adventure in a 2017 *New Inquiry* article. In reading this article and absorbing Audre Lorde's quotations from it, something comes alive for me – both Macharia's attentiveness to building a simple archive with which to think (and thus to live), and curating it as they do, and to show Lorde's speaking of children and home. Both feel profoundly related to the complaint work of parenting children, a task so seemingly devoid of real people who do the making, cleaning, shifting, wiping, wiping some more, holding, losing it. Losing themselves, losing each other.

I don't parent alone. I share the child rearing with my partner who is attentive and kind and patient. He is patient and gentle and sometimes scared. It is indeed, as Lorde comments below about her own childrearing experience, chaotic and lonely. Even doing it with someone is a lonely affair, and often, the women who came to the space ended up complaining first about partners and feeling unseen and then about the labour of mothering – but rarely, if ever, about the children themselves. It strikes me that curating the 'House of Complaints' is not only about the women, but also about everyone in the house – whether a partner, a lover, a grandparent, a sibling or some or other interim person who may or may not be remembered years later.

I gave birth to two children. I have a daughter and a son. The memory of their childhood years, storms and all, remains a joy to me. Those years were the most chaotic as well as the most creative of my life. Raising two children together with my lover, Frances, balancing the intricacies of relationship within that four-person interracial family, taught me invaluable measurements for my self, my capacities, my real agendas. It gave me tangible and sometimes painful lessons about difference, about power, and about purpose.

– Audre Lorde

From "Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986"

My daughter and my son made issues of survival daily questions, the answers to which had to be scrutinized as well as practiced. And what our children learned about using their own power and difference within our family, I hope they will someday use to save the world. I can hope for no less.

– Audre Lorde

From "Turning the Beat Around"

Physically, the space never becomes exactly what I want it to be – not yet any way. I simply haven't got enough funding and I need my full-time job so I just keep it going as best I can with all the interruptions and disruptions and flows that life simply is. It remains ongoing and continues in a different location in 2023.

From November 2022 the women stop making dates to bring their complaints. November in the city becomes hot and sweltering, the city and its buildings and smells are in competition with deadlines from funders, unmet deadlines, exams, reports, endless calls in the car between pick-ups, drop offs and play dates, endless conversations about why why why... People who haven't yet made plans to leave, do. Flights are booked, SUVs are readied for the long road to the various coasts of South Africa.

Dads think about packing and how to get everyone to their destination comfortably; Moms think about food and drink and company for the children.^[2]

Heterosexism: The belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance.

– Audre Lorde

From “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving”

I conclude this piece with my own complaint:

Complaint number 42: I am 9 months pregnant – to be precise, I am 39 weeks plus 4 days – basically the end. The end! There is nothing like the end of pregnancy to teach you the beautiful ugly of forgetting. Nothing like the end of pregnancy to teach you that to make it to month 9 is to make it to the end of a journey, a world which suddenly is not this world and from which I am writing this text. When I look back at this complaint I will be a different person – apart, without this small human inside me. To make it to month 9 means that you and the baby have become one; we share a channel of the spectacular. For a brief moment, these moments and days that lead up to a birth-day you do not know, cannot diarise, you and the baby are one. The line between life and death is thin thin thin... I keep seeing my grandpa in his frail last days, how new-born-like he was and must've felt. Helpless, is the term for people such as this – babies and the elderly. How people looked away in disgust when he couldn't wipe the spit off his lips as he tried to get watery soup down into his gut... Just as we watch the newborn spit up milk – positing it is called. To make it to month 9 is an expectant moment – a full body expands beyond what you imagine possible in a physical sense, then it releases and suddenly, there are two of you. Your capacity pauses – you are just here, every moment is one to the next. It is also thoroughly unrecognisable to anyone else...even those who went through it before. It's a vortex moment – just you and the baby and the shared passage between life in this realm and the next. My complaint today is how scary that is, how unrecognisable I am to me, how much our lives can change.

It makes people nervous – this moment before death – when you can no longer slurp (slurping – a most agitating sound which a 7 year old can do for a looong long time) OR (slurping – a most hopeful sound which an almost 90 year old can't do... you hope you'll hear something smooth pass his lips. You don't.) It makes people nervous – this moment before birth – my mother-in-law anxiously asks if the midwife will induce if I go over 40 weeks. Yes, I say... but as long as there's movement up to 10 days over due date, we are still in the realm of 'normal'. Here I sit, unable to really perch in any comfortable way for more than 20 minute stints – I need to pee, I need to move, the baby moves and tells me where all the organs are now. None of them in their correct places in my body. Only her, she's

[2] This references some of the mothers who had promised they would come to the space to lay a complaint. They promised to show up but then, in the face of domestic duties, they do not. I find it worrying that this says so much about their class category and who they are. These women promise to see me in the new year, to complain then, as though a complaint can be delayed.

the only one who is just where she should be. My feet are high, swollen and peek out from behind the screen. I see pink nuggets of toenails... my partner comments on how they're still relevant. I laugh. Laughter in these moments, is to remind oneself that even in the laboratory, one is not locked in, not caged.

Writing is a form of surrendering of self, an opening up of self to formations of androgynous forms and mutation inside me. A person who has been housed here for 9 months who is now ready to come out. My home is a laboratory. It's warm, its conditions are monitored and set by a system that is mine but which I don't quite control. I am a host. She is a parasite. It is hot here from where I'm writing, hot in my outside body. In my inside body it is just right for her. I do not know when she will come out. 'Babies come when they're ready', they say. They also say this when the baby is conceived and you didn't realise that's what was happening in your body as you hopefully wipe looking for signs of a period... There are many observations about the laboratories that make up this life, these lives. Not one but many. In my outside body – I need to don this hat and now, I need to be with the others, the ones who are now at school and must be collected, fetched, reeled back into the home space, entertained there.

Survival. There in that outside world, people smile kindly and ask how I'm feeling. Then they get in their big, air conditioned cars and whip out a sneaky vape that their husbands won't smell on them later. Mothering. In my inside body, the baby writhes and moves and tells me she is coming soon. 'When', I beg her for an answer. I anticipate the labour with each passing stretch of my belly. This is my last experience of pregnancy, matrescence, postpartum, engorged boobs, recoiling uterus. I'm saying goodbye. This pregnancy/this body is slowly becoming an archive of my reality; it ebbs and flows and so does this complaint. It won't last long, I'll read this soon and not recognise this inside body at all. I'll have a further expanded laboratory for/with/within three small talking humans. To be clear though, my complaint is that the end of pregnancy is monstrous – to use Christina Sharpe's^[3] title in my own life, a monstrous intimacy, between myself and a human I already love but don't know well, if at all. I'll lament none of this not knowing when I see her. I'll recognise her heels and toes from how they punctured me throughout the height of a Highveld summer. The end of pregnancy is hot, it's huge and it feels like it'll never end. Even my face is puffy and swollen!

– Dee Marco, complaint on 17 January 2023, 10:19 am^[4]

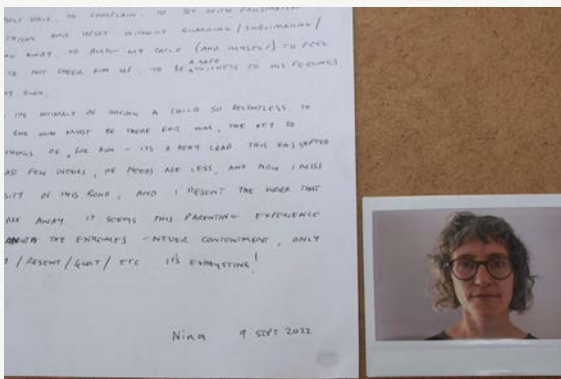
[3] This phrase is taken from the title of Christina Sharpe's book, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (2010). The phrase, as it is used in this piece, does not reference slavery in any way but rather uses the title to refer to mothering/ motherhood as a monstrous intimacy itself.

[4] Sanaa Marco-Morgan was born at 11:48 am (official records say 11:52 but in my mind it's 4 minutes earlier) on 28 January 2023. After a short and fast progressing labour at home where my husband had already filled the birth pool, the midwife, on inspection, found a single foot facing down...not a head! She was born by an emergency caesarian after which a reeling 8 or so weeks ensued. I started a blog called 40 + days on a platform called 'tiny letter' about my third postpartum experience. It is ongoing, both the blog and the state of postpartum foreverness.

The House of Complaints is curated as part of the laboratory, Mother.Lab, and a curated extension of me, my household, these three children, this ongoing archive...It is a recognition that our mother labs are very different but they intersect. We are also thus a reflection of each other in these complex and complicated spaces and ways of doing, these methods of promise. House of Complaints is an auto-theoretical world of its own – one that is mine but is so so much more than me.



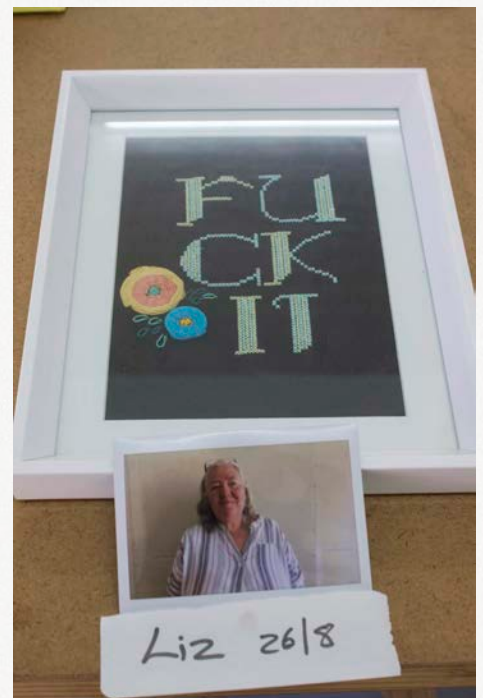
Growing wall of complaints November 2022 (image: Jodie Pather)



Complaint by Nina Barnett (image: Jodie Pather)



Mother.Lab dresser / Dee Marco with children (image: Dee Marco)



Complaint by Liz Ebersohn (image: Jodie Pather)



A portrait of my mother at House of Complaints: Magdalene Marco (image: Jodie Pather)

Dee Marco is a creative scholar based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Dee's research pivots around social and cultural practices and experiences of the everyday, particularly in relation to a life of person-making, caregiving and critical joy finding. More broadly, she is interested in visual culture, cinema and black women's methods of narration and story telling. Dee is the founder of the multimodal research project, Mother.Lab and teaches in Media Studies at Wits University. She is a Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Race, Gender & Class (RGC), UJ.

Barbara Boswell is a writer, scholar and facilitator based in Cape Town. As an associate professor of English Literary Studies at UCT, Boswell teaches and studies Black diasporic women's writing, Black South African women's literature, and queer theory. Recent publications include: 'And Wrote My Story Anyway: Black South African Women Novels as Feminism' (WITS University Press, 2020) and 'Grace: A Novel' (Modjaji Books, 2017).

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