European Journal for Biblio/Poetry Therapy (2025) Vol. 1. No. 1. 58-71.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65018/vol1iss1pp58-71

A Mothers' House of Language
Developing a Bibliotherapeutic Support Model for Narrative Agency in Motherhood

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Abstract

Motherhood is one of the most discursively regulated roles in Western societies. In discourses of motherhood, definitions are established for what motherhood should be, often overlooking what it actually is, which can create a profound disconnect between narrative and lived experience. Psychoanalytic feminist theory has addressed the subordinate position women hold in the symbolic order and called for a women's house of language as a place of their own in the cultural discourse. Crafting a place for oneself amongst the discourses and narratives requires narrative agency, the ability to make interpretive and narrative choices regarding one's life and the surrounding world. With biblio/poetry therapeutic methods, it is possible to explore hegemonic narratives as well as individual ones, and the dialogue between them. By applying the theory of narrative agency to the concept of a women's house of language, I have developed and implemented a bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model for mothers to support their narrative agency and help them build their own house of language. In this article, I will discuss the findings made about the method in my bibliotherapy group for mothers and explore the unique space offered by preventive bibliotherapeutic practice at the intersection of therapy, pedagogy, and activism.

Keywords: biblio/poetry therapy, narrative therapy, narrative agency, house of language, socio-education, discursive self-defence, activism

Introduction

Motherhood has been called the unfinished business of feminism (O'Reilly, 2016, 2), and not without reason. The norms and ideals of motherhood have persisted through the upheavals of equality battles (Dally, 1982, 17), and as noted by the pioneering motherhood studies scholar Andrea O'Reilly (2020, 25), Western mothers today face unprecedentedly high cultural expectations.

We all face a multitude of external as well as internalised expectations in our many roles as family members, friends, and professionals. Problems arise when the expectations conveyed through various political, religious, medical, and legal discourses and narratives create an ideal against which to assess our performance (Woollet & Phoenix, 1991, 39–43), and the narratives carrying the expectations overwhelm our own understanding of what to strive for. In

motherhood, this can often be the case, as becoming a mother can be understood as a developmental transition, during which women may be particularly vulnerable to external expectations (Raudasoja, 2022, 12–14).

The combination of extremely high expectations and a heightened sensitivity to them is understandably problematic, as suggested by research conducted among Finnish parents. Even though Finland is considered one of the best places in the world to have children, according to the latest survey 15 % of Finnish birthing mothers report having symptoms of depression during the baby's first year (THL, FinChildren survey 2020), and Finnish parents are among the most exhausted in the world (Roskam et al., 2021; Aunola et al., 2020).

In order to find ways to support maternal wellbeing, we need a deeper understanding of the expectations, discourses, and narratives of motherhood as well as the individual's role within them. With biblio/poetry therapeutic[1] methods, it is possible to explore hegemonic narratives as well as small and individual ones, and the dialogue between them (Ihanus, 2022, 47–48). Dialogical group processes centering around literature can support the participants' narrative agency, the ability to practice agential choice of which narratives from the surrounding narrative environment to adopt and which to challenge (Meretoja et al., 2022, 391).

By developing a bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model for mothers and employing it with a bibliotherapy group, I aim to find out, whether and how bibliotherapy can help mothers challenge cultural expectations and build their own safe, brave place in language. This I will do as a researcher and a bibliotherapy group facilitator but also as a mother, struggling with very similar cultural expectations as my bibliotherapy group participants.

I will begin the article by discussing the problems facing mothers in their role as knowers, proceed to outline my method focused on strengthening mothers' narrative agency, and discuss the potential and the development areas of the model, framing it not as much a result as a starting point for new, differently designed and targeted working methods to bounce off of. I will conclude the article by reflecting on the contact points of therapy and therapy research with action research and activism, and raise the question of agency as pivotal in these boundary negotiations.

[1] From here on, I will refer to my practice simply as bibliotherapy. I make this choice for two reasons, both of which are related to how I personally perceive the nuances of “biblio” and “poetry” and what kind of meanings they convey in relation to my approach: 1) Even though “poetry” in poetry therapy has been used to refer not only to poems but also to other modes of literary expression, my emphasis on non-fiction genres such as essays and scientific texts as inspiration material warrants an even broader and slightly less airy concept — hence, “biblio”. 2) In both “biblio/poetry therapy” and “poetry therapy”, the word “therapy” stands alone and seems to call for attention. The term “bibliotherapy” is more consistent with my own non-clinical and narrative approach, which places less stress on the therapeutic aspect.

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The discursive struggles and epistemic injustice of motherhood

"Is there a way to know, whether we are on the right track?" (Miiru)

Existential philosopher and phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (2000, 51) has referred to language as the house of being, in which human beings dwell. Psychoanalytic feminist theory has taken a different approach to the house of language, noting that it's not human beings who dwell in it but men, whereas women as building materials cannot themselves enter the house or the symbolic order. Therefore, women need their own symbolic expression in language and a place in cultural discourse; their own house of language. (Whitford, 1991, 48–49; Irigaray, 1985.) In my research, emphasis is placed not on sex or even gender but on the heavily gendered role of motherhood.

To approach the idea of a mothers' house of language, I explore motherhood as both a discursive and a narrative phenomenon. The circulating and competing discourses function as systems of meaning (Baxter, 2011, 2–3), shaping our understanding of the world. In discourses of motherhood, definitions are established for what motherhood should be (Hays, 1996, 21), often overlooking what it actually is (Rich 1995, 16). Narrative I conceptualise in Witten's (1993, 100) terms as "a singularly potent discursive form through which control can be dramatised, because it compels belief while at the same time shields truth claims from testing and debate". Both discursively and narratively, the question of motherhood is primarily epistemic: what qualifies as knowledge of motherhood and who is eligible to produce it.

To highlight the tensions between what is said and what is lived, the theoretical tradition of matricentric feminism has drawn a distinction between the concepts of *motherhood* and *mothering. Motherhood* is seen as an oppressive patriarchal construction bombarded with preposterous cultural expectations, whereas, in the concrete, everyday acts of *mothering* mothers can make motherhood their own. (O'Reilly, 2016, 19–20.)

Epistemically, this is no easy feat. According to the philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007, 1), there are forms of epistemic injustice in the world that wrong people in their roles as knowers. Testimonial injustice transpires when a hearer's prejudice casts doubt on the credibility of a speaker's word, whereas hermeneutical injustice occurs when a gap in our collective interpretive resources negatively affects a speaker's ability to articulate their experience in a way that is generally understandable. As motherhood is a highly discursively regulated experience (e.g., Hays, 1996), motherhood discourses can be seen to dominate the conversation in ways that can create a gap in the collective interpretive resources, potentially hindering mothers from understanding and articulating their own experiences (cf. Fricker, 2007).

The problem, however, is not merely epistemic. As the narrative theorist Hanna Meretoja (2018, 92) has pointed out, epistemic injustice doesn't only concern information and knowledge but quickly turns into a negotiation about styles of existence — about which ways of being and experiencing are considered worthy. For mothers, who cannot find themselves in the cultural narratives of motherhood, this can mean a denial and disavowal of their own motherhood experience.

In her pioneering study of biographical writing as a mothers' house of language, Eeva Jokinen (1993) has explored diaries as a free and nurturing place for mothers to talk as themselves to themselves as knowing subjects. My study will continue and expand this line of thought by looking into the possibilities of bibliotherapy as a building practice for a broader, louder, more interactional house of language. The excerpts from participants' texts at the beginning of the chapters offer a glimpse into the words and phrases that began to shape the shared linguistic space, while the analysis of the course material will be presented in later articles.

Bibliotherapy and the house of language

> *"What shall others think of you as a mother, if you can't even handle such a simple task — the daycare excursion day."* (Maiden)

Bibliotherapy as a form of language-mediated art therapy offers a variety of possibilities for the construction of a house of language. Therapeutic interaction combined with reading and writing can enhance the participants' awareness of themselves and the world, support their resilience, and enrich the tapestry of their identities, values, and relationships. In a group setting, a space for playful exploration into words, images, ideas, meanings, roles, and positions can be established. In dialogical negotiations of meaning, one's truths catch echoes of other truths and are transformed by them. (Ihanus, 2022, 27–28; 41–45.)

My approach to bibliotherapy is inherently narrative in nature. Rather than delving into the intra-psychic processes, narrative therapies focus on the myriad ways in which the beliefs of the culture influence our lives (Monk, 1997, 27–28). Such a focus can be seen as particularly meaningful in relation to experiences strongly regulated and valued from the outside, such as motherhood.

Serving as the very foundation for the mothers' house of language, I will rely on Hanna Meretoja's (2018, 2019, 2022) theory of narrative agency. Here, narrative agency refers to the ability to use, interpret, and challenge cultural stories and make interpretive and narrative choices related to one's own life and the surrounding world. Research done in metanarrative reading groups, aiming at supporting narrative agency, has found the narrative-centered approach to shared reading to be of importance for shaping and enhancing the narrative agency of the participants. (Meretoja et al., 2022, 391; 410). By applying the theory of narrative agency to the concept of the house of language I will thus center the examination of language mainly on its narrative aspects. My work extends the scope of the research conducted in the metanarrative reading groups (Meretoja et al., 2022; Kinnunen et al., 2024), bringing motherhood as a new focal point into the shared theoretical framework.

In Meretoja's (2022, 391–393) theoretical model, narrative agency is divided into three overlapping components: narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality. Narrative awareness refers to awareness of culturally available narratives that influence the way people construct their lives, narrative imagination means the ability to creatively engage with

narrative models and to imagine different narrative paths towards the future, and narrative dialogicality refers to the ability to enter into a dialogue with others and their stories with respect for the singularity of their experiences. (See also Kinnunen et al., 2024, 4–5.) As an addition to narrative agency, I outline the concept of *discursive self-defence*, referring more narrowly to an individual's ability to filter and reject harmful modes of expression.

Building on the three dimensions of narrative agency and the concept of discursive self-defence and working together with the participants of my bibliotherapeutic group for mothers, I aim to sketch possible blueprints for a narrative stronghold against the epistemic and ontological injustice of motherhood. This I view not only as a scholarly or therapeutic endeavour but also as an activistic one. The women's movement of the post-war era criticised mainstream psychology for re-enforcing and perpetuating societal structures harmful for women's mental health and called for a more socially attuned and responsible take on the 'psy' disciplines — an understanding that the psychological was political (Crook, 2018, 1155–1157; 1164). Since then, political awareness seems to have gone out of fashion again, and to me, the activistic approach to therapy research is about putting emphasis back on its vitality to the matters of the mind.

Taking into account, however, that feminism has long since abandoned the strive towards a unanimous subject, and noting that the intensive discourses of motherhood have been recognised as a fundamentally Western middle-class phenomenon (Fox, 2006), it is important to acknowledge the limited nature of my method and the need to further research these questions from the points of view of different groups of mothers.

Building the house

> *"If I could, a moment's peace*
> *for myself to give I would."* (Mustikka)

In the spring of 2024, I crafted, organised, and facilitated a mothers' bibliotherapeutic writing group that met once a week for three months at a local family center in southern Finland.[2] Information about the course was distributed beforehand through advertisements in the family center, local maternity and child health clinics, libraries, and community parks, as well as various neighbourhood and family groups on social media.

The duration of the group sessions, held after office hours, was one and a half hours, except for the two-and-a-half-hour Socratic dialogue. The sessions were purposefully designed compact in order to enable also mothers with young children to find childcare and attend. By expecting the mothers to turn up without their children, I wanted to give them a concrete breather from their role as caregivers and thus allow them space for bibliotherapeutic self-reflection.

[2] In the spirit of critical and participatory feminist research tradition, the participants were also given the opportunity to attend a research analysis workshop six months after the course. As a separate part of the working method, the experiences and findings of the analysis workshop will not be discussed here but explored in my dissertation as an addition to the methodology of both research and therapy practice.

The sessions consisted of bibliotherapeutically facilitated writing and discussing assignments[3], inspired by the three dimensions of narrative agency, narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality, outlined by Meretoja (2022) and described above. Accordingly, the bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model was constructed around three key components: narrative workshop, retrospective futuring, and a combination of dialogical working methods consisting of dialogical diary and my own bibliotherapeutic application of a Socratic dialogue (see Table 1).

Working method	**Theoretical perspective**	**Practice**	**Functions**
Narrative workshop	Narrative awareness	Homework + workshop	Deconstruction and reorganisation of motherhood narratives deemed problematic
Retrospective futuring	Narrative imagination	Recurring writing assignment, completed at three different occasions, once in the beginning, once in the middle and once at the end of the course	Construction of a subjective future ideal of motherhood as a personal and societal role and reflection of the steps needed in order for this ideal to have become reality
Dialogical diaries; Socratic dialogue	Narrative dialogicality	Shared journaling; a philosophical group discussion	Establishment of unstructured dialogical self-expression and co-authorship; framing of motherhood as a philosophical and existential question not open to answers produced through expert knowledge other than that of the mothers

Table 1. The main working methods of the bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model for mothers.

For the narrative workshop, the participants were given a homework assignment to pay attention to different narratives of motherhood, circulating in their narrative environments, and bring into the session a narrative that they found problematic in some way. At the session, the narratives found by the participants were disassembled, and alternatives were created through multiple discussion and writing assignments.

To titillate the mothers' narrative imagination, I constructed a recurring assignment of retrospective futuring. The task was to imagine a subjective ideal of motherhood as a personal

[3] Reading was an integral part of the bibliotherapeutic process, and I used literature as an inspiration for all the different writing and discussing assignments of the course. The inspirational material used to support the writerly method will be discussed in more detail in subsequent articles as well as in my dissertation.

and societal role and write about it as if the present from which one was actually writing was already in the past. "Reminiscing" from the future has been used in utopian thinking, a method of societal imagination. With utopian thinking, it is possible to distinguish new possibilities and systematically yet associatively look for solutions to complex issues (Lakkala, 2017; Eskelinen et al., 2017).

The third and final component of the mothers' bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model was two-fold, consisting of dialogical diaries and a bibliotherapeutic application of Socratic dialogue. Diary writing, when combined with activities such as creative reading and other stimuli, has been found to fulfil the principles of bibliotherapy (Johansson, 1991, 48), but the potential of a dialogically written diary as a part of a bibliotherapeutic course remained to be discovered. Another method of approaching narrative dialogicality was my own bibliotherapeutic application of Socratic dialogue held on a motherhood-related topic of the participants' choosing. Socratic dialogue is a form of philosophical group discussion in which each participant presents their own experience-based perspective on the topic at hand, and over the course of the discussion, a shared view is constructed. (Bolten, 2001; cf. Hankamäki, 2003.)[4] My application of the method relied on a more pronounced interaction of writing and discussing assignments.

The research material consists of the written answers for the course assignments, my research diaries, the participants' questionnaire responses and an audio recording of the Socratic dialogue, which I will analyse using methods of feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (cf. Baxter, 2006, 162; cf. Mills & Mullany, 2011) and narrative agency analysis (Kinnunen et al., 2024, 10). In this article, I will draw on my own research notes and the participants' experiences of the method as expressed in their questionnaire responses and course discussions, referring to the assignment material only insofar as it addresses the question of the method.

Experiences of the construction

> *"One grows/changes to become a legend."* (Neljänlapsenäiti)

In the end, I got to work with one full group of eight mothers, whose circumstances and family situations were profusely varied. Some worked in demanding expert positions in different occupational fields, others dreamt of returning to studying one day. Many had seen the advertisement on social media or in the family center webpage, one had been told about it by a friend and one had been suggested the course by social workers. The youngest of their children was only a few months old, the oldest was completing his military service.

An atmosphere of trust was born during the very first meeting and carried through the entire course — an observation that both the immediate and the subsequent feedback from the

[4] For the neo-Kantian tradition of philosophical practice that I used as a starting point of my approach see Saran & Neisser, 2004.

participants affirmed.[5] The mothers took on the assignments with curiosity and an open mind but kept a healthy vigilance. They didn't hesitate to challenge me to take a mood card, too, or let me know, with a twinkle in their eye, when I had managed to describe the next physical exercise more like an orgy than a bibliotherapeutic assignment. ~ *Excuse me,* one of them said during the Socratic dialogue, roughly paraphrased, ~ *I know that I represent the 'older mothers' here, but could you please change the 80's on the white board into the millenium? I would like to make very clear I wasn't a mother in the 80's.* Warm humour proved to be an essential thread running through the course, in my interpretation playing a pivotal role in creating an atmosphere of trust between virtual strangers, while also serving to momentarily deconstruct the power difference between me as the facilitator and the participants.

The experiences of the method were varied but promising (see Table 2). The narrative workshop lured out an eclectic mix of narratives in a multitude of forms and produced an even richer array of alternative narratives challenging the expectations behind the originals (see Partanen, in preparation). The retrospective futuring was originally seen as difficult, but, having aired their frustrations, the participants generally started reporting the recurring task as having become easier and new ideas having been introduced into the texts on every rotation (e.g. Partanen & Vigren, in preparation). The dialogical diaries would have worked better on a longer course, where each of the writers could have got more turns to write and more interaction could have been established. What I found interesting, however, was how the participants themselves started taking turns in creating writing assignments for one another, thus taking creative leadership and further deconstructing the course roles. The other working method concerned with narrative dialogicality, the bibliotherapeutic application of Socratic dialogue, proved to be one of the most influential methods on the course and even serve as a discursive turning point, after which a concept of "a motherhood of one's own" emerged as a shared goal (see Partanen, in preparation).

Working method	**Functions**	**Outcomes**
Narrative workshop	Deconstruction and reorganisation of motherhood narratives deemed problematic	The refusal of expectations behind the narratives deemed problematic
Retrospective futuring	Construction of a subjective future ideal of motherhood as a personal and societal role and reflection of the steps needed in order for this ideal to have become reality	The hermeneutical cycle of new images and meanings created in the process of repeatedly imaging future motherhood

[5] I attribute the immediacy of the trust partly to the course principle of open communication. As a part of a feminist research practice it was important for me to share the main concepts and aims of the study with the participants. That said, it was a balancing act to give them enough information for them to understand the basics of the study yet leave them room to interpret the process and draw from it as freely as possible. They knew from early on about the metaphor of a mothers' house of language as well as the theoretical concepts of narrative agency, but I refrained from exhaustive expert definitions. This also served the purpose of leaving space for the study to take unexpected turns and allowing myself as a researcher to be surprised about the outcomes.

Dialogical diaries; Socratic dialogue	Establishment of unstructured dialogical self-expression and co-authorship; framing of motherhood as a philosophical and existential question not open to answers produced through expert knowledge other than that of the mothers	Deconstruction of course roles, activation of the participants' own creative leadership and a discursive turn towards a "motherhood of one's own"

Table 2. The main working methods and outcomes of the bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model for mothers.

The feedback about the method and the overall experience was overwhelmingly positive. Out of all the different elements of the course mentioned as important in the feedback, three emerged as the most focal:

- the community of mothers from different walks of life and with children of various ages, allowing for peer support as well as completely different perspectives on mothering
- the feeling of one's thoughts and experiences mattering and the time and space to express them
- the opportunity to write.

What was of specific interest to me was the significance the participants placed on the course regarding their understanding of the expectations and narratives of motherhood. One of the participants wrote as follows: "In the wake of the coursework, I am beginning to practice recognising external and internal expectations better. On the other hand, coursework has given me self-confidence to refuse external expectations." Another wrote: " — It was important to realise, that all mothers ponder very similar things. That many thoughts and expectations come from outside and mothers are very sensitive to detecting them."

The inspection round

> Miiru: *"And like… maybe one can raise children in many different ways so that they turn out good people…"*
> Kanerva: *"And what is a good person anyway…"*

Working with the group of mothers and looking into the materials they produced, it was instantly clear to me, that if narrative agency could be conflated with narrative abilities, there would be nothing to strengthen. The participants were quick thinkers, incredible conversationalists, and imaginative writers, fully able to express a multitude of feelings and experiences in a witty, eloquent, and heartfelt manner.

What became just as clear to me, however, was what they possessed in abilities they lacked in opportunities: the actual space, the cultural permission and the community to safely push the limits of what can be said and thought. The lack of space and permission was demonstrated in a

multitude of discussions and writings, touching on all the mothering decisions made solely to avoid judgment and all the masks worn to hide perceived flaws and difficulties. With all the neighbours gathering at their windows to wonder why somebody would be out with their kids at such a late hour, all the social media followers wondering where the children are in these holiday pictures and all the surprise guests forcing the mothers to abruptly turn off the tv, the agential wiggle room of motherhood started to appear rather fleeting and the need to create discursive and narrative spaces for it all the more pressing.

The outlook on a mothers' house of language as a permissive cultural space for linguistic exploration sheds light on the relationship between the concepts of narrative agency and discursive self-defence. In narrative agency, the focus lies in the ability to use, interpret, and challenge cultural stories (Meretoja, 2022, 391–393), and according to my interpretation, the need for narrative agency is fundamental and concerns any narrative environment. Discursive self-defence, on the other hand, can be seen as a concrete set of skills and conditions required to reject external or internalised harmful discursive phenomena, and it is particularly useful when working with groups battling different forms of epistemic injustice. In this way, discursive self-defence can be understood as a pre-requisite for narrative agency specifically relevant to hostile narrative environments, such as the one surrounding motherhood. Without the ability to distinguish and critically assess harmful narratives and defend oneself against them through continuously training one's consciousness to refuse to internalise the expectations they carry, it is difficult to sustain a more active agency needed in dreaming, articulating and crafting a motherhood of one's own.

What was particularly noteworthy in the research material and course feedback, was how self-defence started growing into a kind of *selves-defence*. The strengthened commitment to "a motherhood of one's own", repeatedly expressed through the feedback, didn't only concern the participants themselves but included all mothers around them, weaving a web of solidarity around a universally understood collective of "mothers". In response to the question of whether the participants had been surprised by the course or had surprised themselves in some way, one of the participants wrote: "I realised that I myself sometimes fall into the habit of repeating the myth of motherhood or questioning others' ways of doing things. But now I ALWAYS remember to first take a pause and think about how everyone is the best expert in their own motherhood." Another one answered a question about the key takeaways of the course: " – I notice, that I read the news more critically now and try to recognise e.g. external expectations placed on mothers. I also give more room in my thinking to everyone's individual way of mothering."

In the end, the discursive shelter we were building turned out to be a shelter not only for an individual or a group against harmful external and internalised expectations but also a shelter for other people from the harmful expectations of the shelter builders themselves. In this manner, the course seemed to function as a type of *socio-education*. Psycho-education has long been an important part of therapeutic practices, aiming at educating the participants about the psychological issues and conditions relevant to their wellbeing. Based on my research as a part of a long line of narrative approaches, at least as much emphasis should be put on addressing our

cultural realities, their profound influence on us, and our own responsibilities in either perpetuating or renouncing them. For the socio-educative take on preventive therapy practices to grow, we need new, highly specialised, and sharply focused research and therapy approaches addressing not only the epistemic injustice facing the groups and individuals we work with but also their cultural and societal accountabilities as co-creators of our shared narrative environments. How could there, after all, be agency without accountability and vice versa?

Revisiting my research, I would first and foremost reconsider the questions of inclusivity. For a research and therapy practice to aim for activism, it should, when possible, try and tackle not only the broader epistemic and ontological injustice but also the concrete everyday obstacles of participation. This could mean anything from arranged child-care to planning the courses together with the participants to optimally design both the themes and the details like session length, frequency, and meeting time to best serve them. These practices could provide a more holistic, action-research-inspired approach to building not only the research and the methodology but also the community and enable mothers from more diverse backgrounds and situations to join in.

Inclusion, however, should not be understood simplistically or strived at automatically. As the expectations and discourses around motherhood are known to be emphatically culture- and class-determined (see O'Reilly 2020, 25–26), no one method or practice has a chance to cater for the many different needs of mothers from various class, race, and culture backgrounds. In my experience, bibliotherapy as a practice also tends to draw in well-educated middle-class women to whom writing is an accessible and natural method of self-expression. This makes my approach very much a partial one, possibly in both senses of the word, but, arguably, the partiality need not be as much of an issue as it may first seem. For the comparative literature and feminist utopian researcher Angelika Bammer (1991), the very strength of a vision lies in its partiality, as we often see more clearly the closer we look (ibid., 4).

As a firm believer in situated knowledges (see Haraway, 1988), I would suggest that my being a part of the group I'm researching has been of fundamental importance for my ability to craft a method specifically designed to cater to them. If my work can then function as an inspiration or a point of militant divergence for a researcher or a practitioner working with another very specific group of mothers, all the better. There is also a keen need for creating communities and practices aimed at bringing together mothers from fundamentally different mothering cultures, and I would warmly welcome the opportunity to collaborate on such a project.

Conclusions

> *"Becoming a mother is a kind of a lie — it's still you."* (loputon)

According to Judith Butler (2006, 241), there is no way out of the compulsion to repeat cultural meanings. Yet, one can repeat differently, and agency specifically resides in the possibility of variation found in repetition. In the light of my research, I have come to perceive the mothers'

house of language from a Butlerian perspective, as a space, permission, and a means to occasionally, for a fleeting moment, repeat differently — seeking and seizing discursive ruptures, varying discourses, and reaching towards one's own voice without the fear of cultural punishment. In this way, the house can be seen to function as a stronghold of discursive self-defence, offering a safe place to let the more active narrative agency to flourish and grow.

Another key realisation of the study concerns the place of non-clinical preventive art therapeutic practices at the intersection of therapy, pedagogy and activism. Having incessantly reflected on my position as a therapeutic practice planner and facilitator as well as participant-observer and analyst of the research, I have come to the conclusion that when working with groups suffering from epistemic injustice and leading a narratively challenged existence, we as researchers and as therapy professionals do not only have the license but the ethical duty to refrain from the classic attempts at "neutrality". As therapy always serves and enhances a certain set of values and a certain system of thinking, instead of feigning neutrality it should strive towards actively acknowledging, reflecting, embracing, and communicating the values and intentions behind the practice.

In this manner, therapy research has a lot to learn from action research that openly addresses a societal problem, sets a target and instead of just researching, aims at fixing it. The same goes for therapy without the research, and this, I argue, has monumental consequences on how we look at agency, too. Understood this way, therapy views the participant as an agent of their own growth but also as an agent of a systemic change — a revolutionary agent, if you will — whose hope, a key concept in bibliotherapy, is no longer therapeutically private but instead societally re-collectivised (see also Eskelinen et al., 2020, 49) for the good of the community. For what is the value of agency if it only extends to ourselves and not to the world we inhabit?

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