

23.03.04 Life Without Boundaries Hour

SM Sarah McConnell

CG Cristina Richieri Griffin

IH Ima Hicks

CM Camilla Morrison

MY Marion Young

SM

At the Super Bowl this year, Rihanna made headlines for her music, her attitude and her pregnancy.

AUDIO SAMPLE

(NEWS CLIP) Rihanna performing with authority, right, as a musical icon, but also with subtle nods that yes, she is pregnant again. And it was no mistake that the soon to be mother of two started and ended her show alone on a floating stage, at what her producer said was the top of the world.

SM

Public motherhood might have reached new heights that night. But women artists have been sharing their mothering with audiences for centuries. Alice Meynell was one of the best known British poets of the late 19th and early 20th century. Her nickname, 'The penciling mama.' Meynell birthed eight kids. And throughout those years she wrote a lot, including a lot of writing about motherhood itself.

CG

She has an amazing phrase that she uses in one of her essays, she says that motherhood is an experience of life without boundaries. That's her phrase, 'life without boundaries.' That motherhood is an experience of like unmatched intimacy with your children. And that can be both a beautiful thing. But it can also be an experience of pain and loss.

SM

From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today on the show, life without boundaries. The Victorian era is famous for putting women, and mothers in particular, on a pedestal. They were domestic goddesses. But Cristina Richieri Griffin says that women writers at the time had more complicated thoughts on the whole motherhood ideal. Cristina Richieri Griffin is an English professor at the University of Virginia.

SM

Christina, you've written about Alice Meynell in an article you called Writing the Rhythms of the Womb? What are the rhythms of the womb you're referring to with her? I love the title.

CG

Oh, thank you. Well, Alice Meynell had a lot of theories about the

rhythms of life, she called them the rhythms of life. Sort of the way life moves in a tide, in and out, up and down. And in that article, I'm interested in how pregnancy, the womb space, sort of encapsulates a pause in those rhythms of life. So I think Alice Meynell, in some of her poetry, and in some of her essays, is really asking, like what happens during that pause? When, when the tide isn't going in and out, what do we experience in that pause represented by pregnancy and expectancy?

SM

Do you mean women of the era weren't writing during the pause?

CG

Um, not necessarily. I mean, plenty of women were writing while they were pregnant. Alice Meynell herself had eight children and wrote a ton, although she published more before and after having all those kids. So certainly women were writing while they were pregnant. Women were also writing, and particularly Meynell, is writing poetry about being pregnant. Either literally, writing poetry that's thinking about what is the experience of pregnancy like in an embodied way, or figuratively, like what is it like to be pregnant with a poem? What does it like to be a poet who is impregnated with a poem, and is waiting for that poem to gestate and become fully formed before it comes out into the world?

SM

It's interesting. I hadn't heard of her. Who were her writing contemporaries, and when did she live?

CG

So she was born in 1875, died in 1922. So she's very much a late Victorian, or an early modernist. And at the time, when she was writing, she was well beloved. So she had a lot of fans. Lots of famous male poets and writers were reading her, John Ruskin thought she was fantastic. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Tennyson liked her. She was actually considered for Poet Laureate after Tennyson in the 1890s. She didn't get the post. She was considered again for Poet Laureate in the early 20th century. And yeah, somehow, you know, 100 years later, after her death, most people have never heard of her. But she, she really was writing for an avid readership.

SM

And she was writing in a context of, what were the views of womanhood and motherhood and, and household hood.

CG

Well, at the end of the Victorian period, the 19th century, held this very strong ideal of the mother. The mother is very much the ideal of womanhood in the 19th century. You know, the stages of womanhood in the 19th century, were sort of like, girlhood, wifehood, motherhood,

widow. Like that was the progression. Those were your four stages from birth to death. And the mother was sort of the pinnacle of that, right? And, interestingly, I think, although culturally in the 19th century motherhood is idealized.

The mother is the moral center of the house. She is the angel of the house. She's the moral guidance for the children. She is hypothetically the moral counter to a potentially, you know a husband who's in the public sphere who can be corrupted. She's in the domestic sphere and can kind of like, resist corruption. In literature, we rarely see that. In literature. 19th century mothers are, I don't know they're absent, or they're terrible, or they're abusive, or... it's really not a very happy state to be in. To be a mother is quite rough in Victorian literature. So Alice Meynell's, writing toward the end of the century that's kind of bearing that paradox of an ideal of motherhood, but a lot of literary representations of motherhood that are not not quite so pretty.

SM

And what does she think of motherhood?

CG

Well, I think, Alice Meynell, both as mother herself but also just as a writer, I think she thinks of motherhood as a, she has an amazing phrase that she uses in one of her essays. She says that motherhood is an experience of life without boundaries. That's her phrase, 'life without boundaries.' That motherhood is an experience of like, unmatched intimacy with your children. And that can be both a beautiful thing, right? Like something like so productive and wonderful to feel

kind of intimacy that you've never felt before. But it can also be an experience of pain and loss. That you can... she describes experiences of like mothers who feel the pain of their children even when they are separated by distance, right? That like, that life without boundaries also means that you, you feel pain when your children feel pain. And you feel lost when your children feel loss. And she has a real striking ambivalence towards motherhood. I think she recognizes both the sometimes valid sentimentality in motherhood, that there's you know, gushing overwhelming love, and also that children can be overwhelming, and we can get what we would now call touch fatigue. Sometimes you just want to be left alone. And Alice Meynell's poetry and her essays really see both sides of that.

SM

Where do you see her make reference to women need to get away?

CG

Well, actually, there's a... some of her poems, she, she talks about, she, she kind of references the like, overwhelm of motherhood. Would

you like me to look up a poem and read one to you?

SM

Yeah.

CG

Alice Meynell has this great poem called The Modern Mother. And it goes like this. 'Oh what a kiss With filial passion overcharged is this! To this misgiving breast The child runs, as a child ne'er ran to rest Upon the light heart and the unoppressed. Unhoped, unsought! A little tenderness, this mother thought The utmost of her meed She looked for gratitude; content indeed With thus much that her nine years' love had bought. Nay, even with less. This mother, giver of life, death, peace, distress, Desired ah! not so much Thanks as forgiveness; and the passing touch Expected, and the slight, the brief caress. Oh filial light Strong in these childish eyes, these new, these bright Intelligible stars! Their rays Are near the constant earth, guides in the maze, Natural, true, keen in this dusk of days.'

So yeah, I think in a poem like this, she, there, you know, she has this very clear and real like tenderness, and you know, she understands the kind of like, orbiting right? These... the way these children are part of the universe, part of her universe, these intelligible stars. And yet at the same time, that opening line, 'oh, what a kiss with filial passion overcharged is this,' it's like, it's too much love. Sometimes it's just too much. Um, that ambivalence just wrapped up all in one poem kind of encapsulates both her poetic relationship with motherhood, and from what we know of her ,her personal relationship with motherhood. She raised seven children, one of her daughters has a really lovely anecdote about how both of her parents, who were both editors, her mother edited several different journals in addition to writing poetry and essays, and running salons and whatnot. Both of her parents were sometimes so busy with work that all of the children lost their first names, and were all called 'Child,' right?

So like, you know, I'm sure she was also a doting mother. And also, you know, sometimes just literally didn't have the time of day to remember someone's name because there were seven of them. So I think, I don't know, I'm, I only have three kids. And I can understand that. And I think there are so many, not just mothers, parents, now who can understand that mix of 'I love you so much.' And also, 'can you please give me a little bit of space?' And I think Meynell understood that well over 100 years ago and encapsulated it in her poetry.

SM

You've written she had a crazy nickname. What was that?

CG

Her nickname was the penciling mama, which I just love. I absolutely

love it. Yes.

SM

Which makes it sound as though it was an unlikely combination.

CG

Yeah, I think it does make it sound like that. And it's also a reminder that Alice Meynell was sort of publicly a mother, right? Like her, it was, it was known that she had children, and also known that she was a writer, right? Like she is penciling, and she is mama. She is both. And I think there were some moments of friction in that. One of her friends, the Irish Catholic poet, Aubrey de Vere, he asked her at some point, I think was after the birth of her fifth child, something like, you know, when will you have time to write poetry again? Right, like there is this recognition that, are these children keeping you from your writing? And yet, ultimately, over the course of her life, she mothered a lot, and she penciled a lot. And I think motherhood actually, in an interesting way, kind of legitimized her for some. It delegitimizes her for others. Virginia Woolf, I think, uses her motherhood as like a denigration. She has a funny line in one of her journals that Alice Meynell like, had seven kids and wrote five paragraphs a day for society papers, and she's not a fan. It's not legitimizing for Virginia Woolf. It's like marginalizing.

SM

And yet her girlfriend...

CG

Yes and Vita Vita Sackville-West was a fan of Meynells. Absolutely. And I'd say I read Alice Meynell's poetry very much in the vein that Vita Sackville-West does, as yeah, approaching motherhood from a pretty contemporary, and modern, and unsentimental angle. So I think, I think Vita Sackville-West is right and Virginia Woolf is wrong, but you know. Virginia Woolf gets most things right, she gets Alice Meynell wrong. We can allow that one tiny mistake in an otherwise luminous woman.

SM

There's one poem that you explore on motherhood and Alice Meynell. Would you read from Parentage?

CG

Absolutely, yeah, Parentage is a really interesting poem. Um, so Parentage has an epigraph about an edict from Augustus Caesar, that the unmarried and childless citizens of Rome are somehow slayers of the people. That that's what, that's what he says that like, if you're not ensuring the future of the population, then you are murderous in some way. And Alice Meynell disagrees, she firmly disagrees. She says, 'No, actually, it's the parents,' right? Parentage is actually the act of slaying, not childlessness. So this is parentage, by Alice Meynell.

"Ah no, not these! These, who were childless, are not they who gave So many dead unto the journeying wave, The helpless nurslings of the cradling seas; Not they who doomed by infallible decrees Unnumbered man to the innumerable grave. But those who slay Are fathers. Theirs are armies. Death is theirs, The death of innocences and despairs; The dying of the golden and the grey. The sentence, when these speak it, has no Nay. And she who slays is she who bears, who bears."

SM

Wow, she who slays she who bears.

CG

I know. It's such an incredible last line.

SM

How is a birthing mother she who slays.

CG

Yeah. Well, what's so interesting is she spends... that poem is in two stanzas. And the second stanza begins with, "but those who slay are fathers," and so she spends the majority of that second stanza talking about fathers, which is, I think, a more direct correlation that we can see, right? Like, fathers are raising up men who are going to go into armies, right? And so like, they are going to kill or be killed in war. And the patriarchy is like, you know, the cycle that generates and keeps generating that. And then mothers emerge in this last line. "She who slays she who bears who bears." And I think it's because of that word 'bears,' right? It's she's actually saying, it doesn't begin with armies, it doesn't begin with fathers, it begins in the womb, right?

It begins in this act of bearing ,that... and it goes beyond just war. Yes, on, on the one hand, a woman who bears a child who will eventually kill or be killed in war is like bearing a death inside her womb. But really any, since everyone dies, every birth is already housing a death. And she's really, again very unsentimentally aware that to be pregnant is to house and inevitable death within one's own body. Just really not the happiest picture of pregnancy at all. But it's a really poignant one. And yeah, I think about that line all the time. Especially the repetition of 'who bears' right? That double repetition. 'She who slays is she who bears who bears.'

SM

As a mother who's borne three children, two daughters and a son, who are at what ages now?

CG

They are eight, four and a half, and one and a half.

SM

How do you relate to that? How do you, how do you fathom that as a mother?

CG

Yeah. When I was pregnant with each of my kids, and especially with my oldest, with my first full term pregnancy, that line "she who slays is she who bears who bears," I am very happy to say did not come to mind very much. I think that would have made for a very cynical pregnancy. However, Meynell does have some other poetry where she's thinking about the unknowability of the in womb space. She has a poem called To one Poem in a Silent Time, that's about a poet gestating a poem inside themselves. And she talks about how like, unknowable This poem is, and yet how it's also so intimately sensed.

That there's something about expectant motherhood as either a literal state, or expectant motherhood is this like, you know, figurative state for producing a poem in which we have intimacy with this thing that we are creating, and yet also a deep gap in knowledge and unknowability between us and the thing that we are growing inside us. And that I experienced when I was pregnant. When I was pregnant with my oldest, I kept thinking 'Alice Meynell was right. I feel closer to this alien growing inside me than I've maybe felt to any one or anything else when she kicks and somersaults, and I think I can feel where her foot is, or her head or whatever.' And yet at the same time, I felt the profound unknowability of this sensed but unseen being who was my very flesh, and yet also felt separate and uncertain, and I had so many questions about. And I just kept thinking to myself, 'Meynell got this right.'

SM

I marveled at how different they all emerged from the get go, right? And then there was a period where when they get language, they tell you of their dreams and nightmares as though you are there. There's a period where they think, 'Well, you know when this terrible thing happened in my dream,' and I thought, 'Oh, I don't want this bubble to burst.'

CG

I remember when my oldest daughter said to me, something like, 'We only know ourselves the best because you can never know what I'm thinking inside of my head.' She kind of had that epiphany of 'I am my own being a you are your own being, and we are connected. But ultimately, we are also separate.' Although I do tell my children the story of how they grew in my belly, and how I gave birth to them. They each have like slightly different but related birth stories, and they love to hear my version of those stories. So I'm going to try and keep my version at least of that connection, the you grew inside me alive, because I've got the scars to show it, you know. So I'm going to keep that story alive. But I also want them to feel their own separateness. They should be their own people.

SM

So interesting that you give them their own story.

CG

I do, I do. Interestingly, I think my children actually each see themselves as part of each other's stories. They like to say, my oldest says that when she was in my belly, my number two kiddo was in my heart. And number three kiddo was in my eggs. She kind of like has this journey that she has charted from like, ovaries to heart to womb. I don't know how that path came about. So I think that she, my kids like to think of themselves as all kind of interconnected in their birth stories inside my body.

SM

I love her mind.

CG

Yeah, it's pretty great.

SM

Well, Christina, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

CG

Thank you so much for having me.

SM

Cristina Richieri Griffin is an English professor at the University of Virginia.

SM

The 2003 Haitian novel, *The infamous Rosalie*, tells the stories of generations of women who are enslaved on a plantation. For these women mothering is a particularly complicated act. Ima Hicks is a Professor of Language and Literature at Virginia Union University. As a Virginia Humanities HBCU scholar fellow, she's taking a closer look at *The Infamous Rosalie*.

SM

Ima, tell me about the book and the meaning of the title.

IH

The Infamous Rosalie is a very beautifully written novella, a short novel, on love, loss, and the creation of home by captive African women and men out of the horror of the Middle Passage. The title refers to the ship on which they were brought to the Caribbean from Africa. Rosalie, a very beautiful name, ironically. But it was the place of so much horror. But the novel is about one of the descendants of these original Africans who landed on Saint-Domingue. And she is experiencing the horror, especially of her female ancestors, which is

quite different from that of what the male slaves go through.

SM

The novel begins with the main character, Lisette, as a young girl, sharing with us the horrors of slavery that she herself has experienced or witnessed, but she's also learned something horrible about her own great-aunt, who was a midwife. Tell me about that.

IH

Yeah, so great-aunt, Bridget was a midwife. And so she brought children into the world, but stuck a pin in their brain. And so they would die. So she has killed 70 of those babies. And each of the babies, she had a little bit of their umbilical cord. And she tied it around in a knot, and wore it around her neck. Lisette would have been her 71st death, but she stopped at Lisette. And because she could not kill her great niece, she decided to give herself up to the authorities. And she was then taken to court, and then burned alive like most people were.

SM

She writes so much about motherhood, and the relationships between these generations of enslaved women. What is she trying to say to us about what these women passed from mother to daughter?

IH

Well, I think first of all, she's trying to show a sense of rebellion that was born in these women. And she's also trying to counter some of the images of the slaves at that particular time which, the slaves as being barbarians, etc. She wants to research, show the human side of slavery, and motherhood is one of those human sides. So we can speak of euthanasia, killing, although it is a crime, it was performed as an act of love, and Bridget has a history of being a loving mother. In fact, two of her sons were killed when they were trying to fight the colonists who were capturing her in Africa. They risked their lives for her. Many of the slaves, some of them served as coquettes, which is the mistress of the slave master, to have a better life.

One of the characters in the novel is a coquette, or mistress, and she had to endure, with a smile, being raped from the master, in order to eventually try to achieve freedom either for herself or her children. She went through several abortions, and at the end, actually died from one of those self-inflicted abortions. Some of the women were impregnated unwillfully. The main character, Lisette, has a relationship with a runaway slave, Vincent, and later becomes impregnated by him, and at the end of the novel decides to keep her baby and to, to run away and to birth the baby in the mountains because she says to herself, regarding her baby, "You will either be born free, or you will not be born at all." So there are various aspects of motherhood, none of which indicate that these women were not loving mothers.

SM

How did Lisette feel about her great aunt killing the babies because she didn't want them to endure slavery? Was she critical? Or did she recognize it as an act of love?

IH

Yes, she did recognize it as an act of love. And Lisette is very proud to be a descendant of this woman who took it upon herself to show rebellion, resistance, and revolt in whatever way she could. And she was an inspiration for Lisette, who later serves as an intermediary between the runaway slaves and people on the plantation, and eventually leaves the plantation to have her own life as a runaway slave.

SM

You know, a reviewer of the book made what I thought was an excellent point. She said the novel about the horrors of slavery serves much the same function as the memoirs of people who survived the Nazi holocaust. That those memoirs of the horrific experiences of Jews at the hands of Nazis help the entire world see what had happened, and come to renounce it. But there are no living survivors of slavery in the new world. And we need novels like this to sort of bring the history to a wider audience.

IH

Yes, that is true. So the question I think that that person brings up is the question of how can literature or scholarly work fill a void in the knowledge of this particular time by foregrounding the quotidian or the everyday lives of the slaves, which is what you don't get in the history books. She is bringing a much needed humanist perspective to that period in trying to, I guess, write a sort of counter history to what has been recorded in the colonial archive. Because few records exist, and those that do exist are from the planters or the colonists. One of those records was what the novelist, Évelyne Trouillot, actually came upon one day by chance.

It was a footnote in a historical book about a real person who actually had killed 70 people and gave herself up. And she went to court, and she was later burned alive. So this fictive character is based on a real character. But there are also a lot of liberties in terms of creation that the novelist takes. And I think more scholarship will lean on these alternate forms of literature to produce what will become the record of voices that have been, as she says, unspeakable, not because of what they're saying is horrendous, but because they were silenced. There were no records of their voices.

SM

What is the work that you are now doing with this book and the other novel?

IH

it needs to be brought to the attention of a lot of people who are interested in cultural memory, and trauma, and its effect on people. And how that has become something that is generational, that is being passed down through centuries. And how can we learn from that to make the world a better place?

SM

Ima Hicks, thank you so much for sharing your insights with me on With Good Reason.

IH

Thank you for having me.

SM

Ima Hicks as a Professor of Language and Literature at Virginia Union University, and a Virginia Humanities HBCU Scholar Fellow.

SM

The Virginia Festival the Book presents Finding the Light, an evening with best selling authors, including Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, on March 24 in Charlottesville. For more great book events, visit [v-a book dot org](http://v-a-book-dot-org). This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

SM

Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities. The clothes we wear tell a story about who we are, but they also change our stories. Camilla Morrison believes that a costume design can explore big ideas like what it means to be a woman, and how women grapple with motherhood. Morrison is a Visiting Professor in Costume Design at Radford University.

SM

Camilla, you had a project you did with women in North Dakota called Of the Earth. What was that based on?

CM

So at the beginning of COVID, a lot of my work was canceled, and a lot of theaters were closed. I worked at the University of North Dakota at that point. And I was incredibly honored and surprised to get one of the individual artist fellowships through the North Dakota Council on the Arts. And I was able to interview many different kinds of women from across North Dakota. And from that I compiled their stories. And I brainstormed using a technique that I call brainstorming poetry. So I looked at some of the things that maybe were similar, that multiple people said. And one of the unifying connections across my discussions with each individual, was their connection in some way to where they grew up, the land itself. And so that's why the project is called Of the Earth.

SM

I read several of those poems. And I wonder if you'd read one of them for me, especially the one called Love and Expectations. And tell me a little bit about where this comes from.

CM

Sure. Okay. Let me grab that poem. This is called Love and Expectations. Legacy we carry on. What is left behind when we are gone? Our memories told to some, our children, grandchildren. Those who did not survive, and those who are not to be. Recipes, caring, love, joy, communal experience. Not chosen, sometimes expected. Against the rules, chosen. Against all odds we live, we carry on. So Love and Expectations is a piece that is directly connected to motherhood. The questions that I asked their participants were "Do you feel called to motherhood?" And "When did you know this about yourself?" So ultimately, when we were talking about, you know, motherhood, what does it mean to you? When did you decide that you knew you wanted to be a mother? Or maybe, that that was not a choice for you? Or maybe, it was something that has difficult memories and connections connected to it? So I spoke with people who had many different experiences and opinions when it came to motherhood.

SM

I know part of your research agreement meant you wouldn't share any specific stories from participants. But can you tell us some of the themes that stood out to you from the women you spoke with about motherhood?

CM

Some of the things that really came up over and over again is the communal experience around motherhood. And I was told a lot of stories that included generational experiences, you know, having multiple generations together in one home. Maybe sharing the communal experience of cooking a recipe that has been passed down from generation to generation. And there were many things that were shared with me, many joyful experiences, but also many painful experiences. Thinking about, you know, what does it take to be a mother, you know, sometimes that choice is not necessarily one that is an easy choice. Sometimes it feels more automatic, something you might just be expected to do and not really necessarily feel like it was ultimately your choice, but it's more of a cultural expectation. So there were a lot of juxtaposed experiences that were shared. And I wanted that to be included in this piece, Love and Expectations.

SM

I thought the costume that you created to represent these many ideas of motherhood was striking. It wasn't necessarily motherhood and apple pie, right? It was more complex than that.

CM

Absolutely.

SM

Would you describe it?

CM

The costume for Love and Expectations, ultimately, is a very long dress. There are long pieces of canvas that are coming from the torso of the dress, and they're falling down and cascading on the ground. These are the vines of something like a tree that connects directly to the ground. One side has an arm with many vines coming off of it. It's a little heavier, and it's hard to move. And that side sort of tells us more of the responsibility, and the feelings of maybe heaviness that come with motherhood.

SM

So that's one side of the costume, the sort of stiff canvas. And then the other side is much lighter.

CM

The other side of the costume is a long piece of mesh that goes down the other arm, and also has red thread running through the mesh of it. And the red thread represents a little bit more closely, kind of the the blood vessels, and our veins, and the biological connection to blood in our body. But of course, that's not the only path to motherhood. There are many different paths that I heard about. This piece has canvas, and mesh, and different kinds of paints on it to represent many different experiences.

SM

What sort of responses did people have to the work?

CM

People had many different reactions, and when these pieces were all created, I took them on a little mini tour, and I visited three different regions of North Dakota. So when I went to visit Fargo, you know, I was talking with someone and all of a sudden I heard somebody say, "Blood, yes, that is motherhood." And so even though the red is actually quite a small part of the costume, that is really what stood out to one of the people who came and just saw the costume. That really spoke to them.

SM

This wasn't the first costume exhibition you've done that explores motherhood or womanhood. Tell me about one of the costumes in a project you did called Nightmares Are Dreams, Too.

CM

Absolutely. So this really is kind of a time capsule of what I really

felt like were sort of the experiences that really stood out to me of being a woman in the world, kind of up to that time. So one piece that a lot of people have shared with me that they felt really connected to is a piece called Carrying. This piece is ultimately a very soft, close-fitting jersey dress that is covered in different hanging sacks. And the different hanging sacks are filled with different things. There... one of them is filled with rocks. Another one is filled with leaves. Another one is filled with soft foam. And so it's very uneven. And it really affects how the person moves when they're wearing this piece. It's kind of hard to move very smoothly without sort of picking some of the the pieces up and moving with you.

SM

So it was called Carrying, because is this a woman in pregnancy?

CM

Certainly, I think that the language of the piece connects it to motherhood. And a lot of mothers have told me that they felt really connected to this piece. Because do you might physically carry your child around at one point, but ultimately, it's called Carrying because I felt like as a woman, I was expected to take a lot on, and often take on maybe more of an emotional burden. And, you know, be able to sort of carry a lot of things all at once and make kind of the room or the world comfortable for other people. Often that, I felt like because of that, I wasn't necessarily taking care of myself in a great way. I was carrying things for other people first. So I think it can connect to a lot of people in different ways.

SM

And of course, the whole theme of Nightmares Are Dreams, Too was, you know, a little frightening, a little dark. And I wonder, was this your own idea of womanhood and motherhood? When you were growing up in the Marshall Islands, was the vision presented to you of motherhood and womanhood dark? Or something that you came to later?

CM

I love this question. Thank you so much for asking. So I am so grateful to have grown up on an island named Kwajalein in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Because I grew up in this country, I got to see women and motherhood in a different way than I often see in the communities where I live in the States. So in the Marshall Islands, women are very, very valued, and are valued not only as mothers, but leaders in their family, but also in the community. And when I came to the United States, I saw many women not being treated very well in different ways. And so I think that, you know, seeing women celebrated in the Marshall Islands, and getting to see you know, how people are celebrated in different ways, like the first birthday is a really big celebration in the Marshall Islands. And it's a celebration of the mother and child both surviving childbirth, and living for... through the first year. Certainly, this piece is a reflection also of, you

know, how... where I grew up, and kind of where, where I've lived since then. I think it's very much a collection of experiences.

SM

That's such a beautiful idea that in the Marshall Islands, we celebrate the mother thriving and living through the birth, and the child succeeding. What a beautiful thing to do to celebrate both. Where were you when you had a kind of epiphany that that's not always done everywhere.

CM

You know, just sort of hearing different mothers being treated differently, especially in the different jobs that I've had. In the theater community, being a mother is not the easiest thing to do often because rehearsals are in the evening. It's not necessarily when childcare is available. And that's something that I think the theater community has really started to recognize in different places, and has started to support and value in different places, but resources have to be put towards that value as well.

SM

Camilla Morrison, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

CM

Thank you so much for having me. It was a pleasure to speak with you.

SM

Camilla Morrison is a Visiting Professor in Costume Design at Radford University.

SM

In recent years, postpartum depression has become a little less taboo to talk about. Experiences used to be whispered about, are now shouted on TikTok and Instagram. My next guest has studied maternal depression, and is currently looking at one way, it changes how mothers parent. Marion Young is a psychology professor at the University of Virginia's College at Wise.

SM

Marion, you've been delving into the effects of screen time on young children, especially in the earlier years. But earlier work of yours also looked at a link between mothers who were depressed or experiencing depression, and screen time. What did you see? Was there any sort of a correlation between maternal depression and more screen time?

MY

What the research has found is that yes, that actually moms who are depressed, they did have children who were using the screen just a little bit more than those children whose moms weren't depressed. The

moms who were depressed, were using it as a way of engaging with their child, right? And so they were providing them with the screen instead of having to do one-on-one interaction.

SM

During the time you are working with these mothers, what did you come to understand about maternal depression?

MY

We know how important that mother-child relationship is. In fact, when I was preparing for this interview, I actually researched on a database, I'm like, out of curiosity, if I put in the search term 'maternal depression,' how many articles that I get back, and I got back over 5,300 articles, right? So we know that the relationship there between the mother and child is very, very important. And it, you know, impacts a wide variety of different aspects of child development. And so, you know, what I was seeing with my studies looking with maternal depression, is that it does really impact, I would, if I could put it down to one word, I would say 'responsiveness.' Right? So when you think about the mother-child relationship, one of the most important aspects is that responsiveness, right? So when I'm a baby, and I cry, and you know, mom comes and changes my diaper, she feeds me, or she holds me, I learn that the world is, is safe, and that I can trust it. And that responsiveness continues. You know, when I come and ask her a question to help me with my homework when I'm in school. Or, you know, I asked her for some advice in this relationship when I'm a teenager. And so what we see sometimes with moms who have maternal depression, again, depending on whether or not it's mild depression, or major depressive disorder, what we find is that responsiveness goes down, right? And so they have a hard time... because they're having a hard time regulating themselves, they have a hard time interacting with others, and even with their own children.

SM

You would think that almost everybody who experiences childbirth, and then the rigorous unsleeplessness of caring for a small person would experience some measure of depression, right, at least briefly?

MY

For sure. And so one of the very earliest studies, and it's been about 10 years ago, back when I was in graduate school at West Virginia University. What we found is that moms who, their babies were waking up at more at night at six months, reported more depressive symptoms. So they wouldn't necessarily maybe qualify for like major depressive disorder classification, but they were definitely reporting some symptoms of depression, right? And it's because you know, at six months what we see is babies start waking up a lot, because we think part of it is that they're going through motor development. And because they're trying to figure all that out, and what's going on in

their, their little brains at that time, they tend to wake up more, and signal to mom and dad, 'Hey, come help me with this,' right? And so, you know, we saw that that is true that at six months, they you know, when babies start waking up again more frequently, that you know, the moms who are waking up with the babies, because it's not always moms that wake up with them. Sometimes it's the dads, or whoever their primary caregiver may be. We were seeing that they were reporting more characteristics, if you will, associated with depression, like irritability, loss of appetite, loss of interest or pleasure in things that they typically enjoy, feeling down, that sort of thing.

SM

How many young mothers do you think experience this, this idea of maternal depression?

MY

So I would say if you're looking at statistics, right, and what research has kind of panned out, I would say that probably about 20% of women during their lifetime will experience some sort of episode of depression, right? But as far as what... what relating to what we refer to as postpartum depression, or what maybe would be an even better term, 'the baby blues,' that occurs roughly in about 8 to 14% of new moms who are experience that type of depression, right? Right after baby's born and just such a severe level of depression that they have a really hard time interacting with their baby, you know, breastfeeding their baby, you know, that sort of thing.

SM

Do you think they even know they have it themselves?

MY

Oh, man are so that's such a complicated question, right? Because I think if you're, if you're a new mom, and you've never had an experience, obviously, with pregnancy, I mean, right, your body changes so much during pregnancy. And then of course, the whole process of going through birth, and you get to the other side, and 'Oh my gosh, I'm responsible for this tiny human being, and he doesn't, he or she doesn't come with an instruction manual,' right? And now I have to get up every three hours and, you know, rock them this way, if they're crying this way, and rock them this other way, if they're crying this way, or just stand up and walk them around, or, you know, whatever it may be. And 'Oh, they can have this food, but not this food.'

And so it's a lot, right. It's a lot of information to take in. There's still a lot of hormones that are, you know, getting back into place to what they were prior to pregnancy. And so honestly, I think that maybe some moms just think this is supposed... this is how I'm supposed to feel. I get really excited when I see people, especially

celebrities, because I think they have a really large platform, especially when it comes to social media. You know, one that pops into mind is Chrissy Teigan has always been very open about her experiences with postpartum depression, right? And I think the more we talk about it, the more hopefully new mothers can be like, 'Oh, wow, this isn't normal, right? Like, I'm not supposed to feel like I don't want to hold my baby, or I don't want to breastfeed, or I don't even care if they eat.' And so I definitely think that maybe even you know, the statistic I gave you of 8 to 14%, that even maybe low, right? Because I think a lot of moms probably underreport it. And or, you know, for majority of moms are probably lucky that they just kind of, quote unquote, get through it, right? And that it doesn't develop into something even more severe.

SM

At least until recently, it seems like a lot of women would, shyly maybe, tell someone in confidence, 'I'm having a really rough go of it as a new mother,' and then be told, 'Hey, you've got this, you're fine. You're not depressed.' As a way to sort of perk them up, right?

MY

I think, so... You know, there's this whole idea of, of knowing the difference between empathy and sympathy, right? And not trying to silver line things. This is actually from Dr. Brené Brown, who is the well known social worker out of the University of Houston, Texas. And she talks about this, like silver lining stuff for people. And also, you know, doing that, like, 'Oh, it's okay, everybody feels this way.' Or, 'It's okay, it'll pass,' right? That is not actually the right thing to do. Right? Like you want to do is you want to be like, 'Oh, man, I hear you. And I feel like I don't know what to say. But let's talk more about that. And let me see if I can help you figure out a way to make this better.' And maybe that step of making it better may be talking to a mental health professional.

SM

So in your study of small children and their use of screen time, and, and what triggers it, and what the effects are, did you come across maternal depression because some of the moms of the small children were depressed? Or was it more deliberate as part of your experiment?

MY

So what I would do is, you know, during... when I was doing the assessment with the children, like, for example, they come into our lab, and they actually interact with... I give them an iPad or Kindle for kids. And they'll play with it for a certain amount of time. Then after that, they do some developmental assessments with me and play some games, see how they're doing with like problem solving, and language. So while all that's going on, we have mom fill out some questionnaires, right? Because we are just gaining gaining a snapshot with our study. So we also want to make sure that we're getting

information about what is their general usage of technology when they're not here in the lab with, when they're at home with their parents. And in addition to that, I always just throw in some questionnaires about depression, anxiety, right? To... one to see how the moms are doing, right? And also to see if it is going to be associated with screentime, right? And with some of the technology use and with some of the other developmental outcomes that we have in our study.

SM

And you didn't see much correlation, but you did see some?

MY

Yeah, all we have seen... and again, this is pilot data, we're collecting more data. But what we found is that their kids were using the screen a little bit more. And we're talking minutes here, right? By about 15 minutes or so, overall, than compared to moms who were not depressed.

SM

Because you were monitoring the screen time or because that's what they reported?

MY

Because that's what they're reported. So when they come in, we know how much they're gonna get, right? They're gonna get between 15 to 45 minutes of screen time, depending on what group they're in, when they come into the lab. But again, because that's just a snapshot, right? And I'm seeing... I'm trying to investigate the immediate effects of using technology, right, and how that may impact children's impulsivity, and some of their other problem solving abilities, and emotion regulation skills in the lab. But I also want to know about what potentially goes on outside of the lab. And so that's why we also asked Mom to report on home, what type of screen time, are using screen time to watch YouTube kids, are using screen time to play this game, are using screen time to FaceTime somebody, right? Like, you know, there's a lot of different varieties, and so we just wanted to get more information about what the child does on a daily basis.

SM

Marion Young, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

MY

Thank you very much for having me. I truly appreciate it.

SM

Marion Young is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia's College at Wise.

SM

The Virginia Festival the Book presents Finding the Light, an evening with best selling authors, including Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, on March 24 in Charlottesville. For more great book events, visit [v-a book dot org](http://v-a-book.org). Support for this episode of With Good Reason comes from the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation. This is a charitable trust created by the will of acclaimed 20th century artist Joseph Cornell, that honors the memory of the artist and his younger brother Robert. With Good Reason is produced by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan Nation, the original people of the land and waters of our home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Lauren Francis, and Jamal Milner. Cassandra Deering and Aviva Casto are our interns. Special thanks to Jennie Taylor for booking assistance. To comment or for the podcast, go to [with good reason radio dot org](http://withgoodreasonradio.org). I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.