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Holding On and Letting Go: Material, Grief, and Care

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Holding On and Letting Go: Material, Grief, and Care

by Alexandrya Eaton



About the Artist

Alexandrya Eaton is a contemporary Canadian artist whose practice involves painting, textiles, and performance. Eaton has had over fifty solo exhibitions of her work and her paintings can be found in numerous public and private collections across Canada and internationally. Eaton's research investigates alternative ways of knowing and examines how matrilineal connections can be restructured by incorporating traditional textile practices into her painting practice as a bodily form of memory, reaffirming matrilineal kinship relationships through making. Eaton earned her MFA from Emily Carr University of Art & Design in 2024.

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How might textile making be a medium for articulating and transforming emotion? I explore matrilineal textile production as a means for processing grief. As I perform various techniques of hand-making—pulling apart and stitching together, deconstructing and reconstructing—I also manifest my journey with matrilineal loss and engage in acts of remembrance. Difficult emotions such as fear and sadness are transformed through this making into soft tactile works imbued with love, hope, and joy.

When my youngest child left home last year, I experienced an overflow of emotions that I was not prepared for: concern, worry, pride, anxiety, and sadness. My research asks: how do you fold another being into your own and then let go?

I pay close attention to my emotions and value the importance of emotional knowledge. In this respect, my research is informed by Robin Wall Kimmerer from the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Kimmerer writes about her scientific studies but integrates her emotional knowledge and draws from her personal experience of motherhood. In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge* (2013), Kimmerer discusses her feelings about her children growing up and leaving home when she writes:

What does a good mother do when mothering time is done? As I stand in the water, my eyes brim and drop salt tears into the freshwater at my feet. Fortunately, my daughters are not clones of their mother, nor must I disintegrate to set them free, but I wonder how the fabric is changed when the release of daughters tears a hole. Does it heal over quickly, or does the empty space remain? And how do daughter cells make new connections? How is the fabric rewoven? (93)

Kimmerer writes in a way that provides facts and evidence but mixes it with her emotions and reflections, creating a personal retelling of her experience. I am inspired by Kimmerer's approach, which values the importance of emotional and matrilineal knowledge. I aspire to do the same through my studio practice.



Figure 1. Eaton, Alexandrya. *Painted and smocked canvas*, 2023.

My mother had Alzheimer's for over a decade and passed away recently. Towards the end of her life, she no longer knew my name. For many of those years, I carried a heavy anticipatory grief. I was a mother to young children and a caregiver for my mother. At times, the sadness was overwhelming. As bell hooks writes in her book, *All About Love*, "we are taught to feel shame about grief that lingers" (2001, 200). I felt that no one around me understood the pain and the heaviness on my shoulders that never seemed to go away. In her book, *Birds, Art, Life*, author Kyo Maclear similarly writes about her own experience caring for her ailing father while also being a mother to young children (2017). Maclear says: "I did not speak of the relief of coming home late at night to a silent house and filling a tub with water, slipping under the bubbles and closing my eyes, the quiet soapy comfort of being cleaned instead of cleaning, of being a woman conditioned to soothe others, now soothed" (2017, 6).

Maclear's writing resonates with me on many levels, as her descriptions of grief are powerful reminders of the deep sorrow I experienced during my mother's illness. Maclear also writes:



Figure 2. Eaton, Alexandria. *Compression*, 2023. Painted and woven canvas.

Through my painting research, I synthesize my personal experience formally (see Fig. 1-5). My research is labor-intensive, full of repetitive processes that mirror the labor involved in motherhood and caregiving. I have physically transferred the time and care of love into my canvas, paint, and stitching.

In *The Faraway Nearby* (2014), author Rebecca Solnit similarly speaks about her personal experience with her mother, writing:

They say Alzheimer’s mimics childhood in reverse, but children’s voracious minds are seizing on the knowledge that’s disintegrating at the other end of life, and the conditions are as dissimilar as gaining and losing. I thought of my mother as a book coming apart, pages drifting away, phrases blurring, letters falling off, the paper returning to pure white, a book disappearing from the back because the newest memories faded first, and nothing was being added. (11)



Figure 3. Eaton, Alexandrya. *Thesis Exhibition Installation*, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, 2024.

I relate deeply to Solnit’s words; her writing speaks to transformation, to the natural evolution of life, from being cared for to becoming the caregiver. It reminds me of the words of writer and storyteller, Ivan Coyote, who describes their experience as a non-binary person as one of *un-becoming* (2021). This term again suggests transformation: “returning, undoing, unbecoming, shedding” (Coyote 2021, 165). Human life exists as a

state of evolution; we shed our old selves to become something new. I appreciate this approach, that life is full of endings and beginnings, and yet, each transition holds the potential for an element of grief.

The idea of grief having a form that can be dragged, battered, torn, and then mended is fascinating and directly informs my piece, *Grief Cloak* (2024). The cloak is heavy enough to make it difficult to walk but light enough around the edges for the wind to cause it to blow and billow, activating the piece with a sense of movement and embodied knowledge. What is grief? Where does it live? Where can it go? From my personal experience, it lives in a physical body, in the muscles, the organs, the heart, and the brain, but also in the feelings and the memories, in hopes and fears, in tears and laughter. Grief presses down on us, on our physical bodies, but also our excitement and our creativity, and it is heavy. During my performance, I dragged the cloak, hung my head and slumped forward, taking slow and careful steps. While I walked and wore the cloak, it dragged on the ground, getting caught on the boardwalk and branches, getting dirty. In this way, I visibly carried my grief through the landscape—a landscape full of memories—and I carried it until I was too tired to carry it any longer.



Figure 4–5. Eaton, Alexandria. *Grief Cloak*, performance, 2024. Photo by Annie France Noel.



Figure 4–5. Eaton, Alexandrya. *Grief Cloak*, performance, 2024. Photo by Annie France Noel.

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