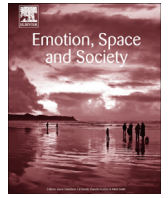




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Mothering, mentoring and journeys towards inspiring spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns how care work in mothering is interconnected with caring academic praxis, and the ways in which processes across both (and their mutual co-construction) are gendered, raced and institutional. Hence, in this paper, we ask ourselves how transgressing professional and caring boundaries may inform us about how we 'do' geography while making practices and creating spaces that have enabled us to work and care for our children and families. We find that care normatively associated with mothering permeates our professional work, just as our professional work has shaped us as mothers. To us, doing geography means acknowledging this and involves a responsibility to develop mutual processes of teaching, research and mentoring along with strategies of care such as mothering. We acknowledge that our practices of mothering and mentoring are intertwined within structural and personal relations such as gender hierarchies, race and scholarly positioning. Our practices of mothering and mentoring have enabled us to negotiate conventional ontologies of private and professional spaces and trace what we term 'inspiring spaces' both within the academy and beyond.

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1. Introduction

This paper concerns how care work in mothering is interconnected with caring academic praxis, and the ways in which processes across both (and their mutual co-construction) are gendered, raced and institutional. As geographers from different generations and dissimilar cultural contexts, we are drawn to the questions relating to how our practices of mothering and aspects of our professional work such as mentoring, networking and negotiating the field have messily 'bled' into each other. We find that silences around balancing the professional and the personal in the praxis of geography are telling. For us, the experience and emotions associated with mothering permeate our work as professional geographers, while at the same time being in the field and pursuing academic careers shapes our practice of mothering. This messy but constructive bleeding of borders compels us to ask what particular contribution the experience of mothering makes to practices of care in our work as geographers. It is these practices that have enabled us to carve out what we term 'inspiring spaces'. Such spaces are suffused with care and have proved crucial in our

journeys as professional geographers.

Within emotional geographies much has been written about the disruptive effects of caring and how responsibilities of care have blocked the capacity of women scholars. Conradson (2003: 451) notes that a growing body of work explores the significance of care in particular settings, such as the home, health institutions and the work place, and how emotionally demanding care work generally is. Within these studies, relations and practices of care are implicated in the production of particular social spaces. The care-taking tasks that bring people together in these settings involve both physical and emotional labour, and often depend disproportionately upon the commitment of women.

Other sources of inspiration are the works on the ethics of care in the work we do as geographers by Bondi (2002), Lawson (2008), Massey (2004), Pratt (2004), and others such as Azmi and Lund (2010), Boyer and Spinney (2016), Milligan and Power (2009) who have written on mothering and motherhood in a transnational world. Lawson (2008) in her presidential address to the American Association of Geographers (AAG), asked the audience to think about their responsibilities as geographers, and to focus

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attention on how their research, teaching, and professional practices might shift in conversation with care ethics.

The emerging debate on gendered impacts of neoliberalism is similarly inspirational, particularly for academics with caring responsibilities. Mountz et al.'s (2015) article on slow scholarship mentions the 'career interruptions' in this age of the neoliberal university, where every output and 'impact' is audited. Young academics, particularly women, have to resort to postponing care work by waiting to have children until after their tenure, carefully timing the intervals between the births of their children, stretching working time, or working part-time to remain competitive and employable (Klocker and Drozdowski, 2012). By contrast, slowing down represents a commitment to good scholarship, teaching, and to a collective feminist ethics of care that challenges the accelerated time and elitism of the neoliberal university (Mountz et al., 2015:1238). Similarly, Peake and Mullings (2016), in their article on the mental health of academics, note that neoliberal universities brush off the increasing crisis of emotional distress as the 'new normal'. A new and caring academic practice has to be developed to counteract this.

Our intention is to add to the knowledge produced in the above-mentioned literature by trying to identify where, in situations of being mothers and mentors, we face the need to think more deeply about the emotional qualities of our caring spaces and how these 'inspiring spaces' may be crucial to our academic work. While the literature on geographies of care shows how experiences of motherhood mostly block the capacity to experience and contribute to care, our experience is that such care has an experiential quality that enables it to be inspiring too. Through a close exploration of our praxis as mothering geographers, we contend that our practices of mothering and doing feminist geography are inextricably intertwined. We argue that care work, particularly mothering, remains an essential though invisible, unacknowledged and unaccounted aspect of professional work within the discipline. 'Un-hiding' such care within academic praxis is very much a part of our practices as feminist geographers.

We note with concern how mothering in academia is often essentialized to women and confined to periods of absence during care leaves, positioning it as mutually exclusive to academic work. We also note how the emotions of mothering and care leveraged into academic work have not yet been taken into account. To us care is as much an emotion as it is a practice. Emotionally we understand care as commitment and concern, as opposed to apathy. In the following, we show that the caring spaces we term 'inspiring spaces' (which in our cases are linked to mothering), despite being tiring, time consuming, and academically less rewarding, have enabling capacities. However, from the outset, we emphasize that being a biological or social mother is not a prerequisite for the creation of such caring spaces, but in our case these experiences and emotions are intertwined and tended to flow into each other.

We initiate our discussion by presenting the background to our conversation on mothering, gender and geography as part of an auto-ethnographic methodology that enables us to talk about our personal and academic cartographies in different cultural and institutional contexts. Examining our mothering practices provides us a prism through which to view other aspects of our professional work such as mentoring, networking and academic encounters in gendered institutional contexts.

Our arguments are framed around fluid and feminist mothering and mentoring, negotiating differences and structural hierarchies of race and gender that we have encountered in an attempt to underline how they have helped us to develop caring practices and 'inspiring spaces'. Finally, we interrogate the nature of these 'inspiring spaces' and their value and significance in our professional lives. In doing so, we may have linked to new ontologies of

space suffused with caring practices that are vital, though still largely unaccounted for in professional practice, in the same way that smaller, more informal, and emotionally charged exchanges are not so visible in what constitutes formal academic discourse.

2. An auto-ethnographical methodology

According to Ellis et al. (2011) auto-ethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledge and accommodate subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding them or assuming they do not exist. Auto-ethnography questions conventional ways of doing research as narrow, limiting, and parochial (Ellis et al., 2011: 41; see also Hooks, 2000; Nagar, 2014; Smith, 1999). It enables us to view the world with a wider lens and helps us to understand how what we are and what we have experienced, influences our ways of seeing and interpreting the world. One form of auto-ethnography is personal narratives, where authors view themselves as the phenomenon and write narratives specifically focused on their academic and personal lives (Ellis et al., 2011: 43). Adapting this method, we have referenced our lives as mothers and academics to make sense of the invisible but essential care work that stemmed from being mothers and to rationalize how this has been crucial to the creation of 'inspiring spaces' that have enabled us to work and care in our academic practice.

Our methodology involved drawing upon our deeply reflexive autobiographical exchanges with each other over a period of time, mainly between 2002 and 2016, as we met at different conferences and workshops. In addition, we also included our other ongoing dialogues over email and skype, as well as our smaller, informal, spontaneous, emotional and extremely insightful exchanges on this topic that would have otherwise remained outside the ambit of formal knowledge making. Drawing upon these exchanges, we set out to conduct a set of autobiographical interviews on each other in 2014 which we recorded and transcribed verbatim. In these interviews we took turns to discuss and frame our positions by interpreting our experiences *together*. In this sense therefore, our methodology transcends a conventional interview. It goes well beyond what Ellis (2004) terms 'reflexive dyadic interview', to include more inputs and blur the lines of power between interviewer and participant to give an equal voice to both of us.

Briggs (1986) has mentioned the pitfalls of 'communicative hegemony' where the interviewer may impose their own communicative strategies and repertoire of meaning on the participant. We feel that our methodological adaptation allows us to overcome this and to a large extent disrupt power relations inherent in conventional interviews. Furthermore, it also brings our smaller, informal insights and exchanges into the process of formal knowledge making. To us, recognizing the value of these smaller exchanges and bringing them into formal knowledge making is as important as un-hiding care work in academia and stems from a similar feminist standpoint. We are also influenced by publications on collaborative autoethnography such as those by Anderson and Fourie (2015), Chang et al. (2013), Hernandez et al. (2017) which point to the potential of shared ways of seeing and writing. Marked by mutuality, reciprocity and inclusion, our methodology fits this description the best and we agree with these authors on the value and implications of this methodology.

Our friendship, comfort, trust and familiarity with each other's contexts proved crucial to the success of our methodological frame. It could be said that we 'linked' even during our first meeting and gradually 'bridged' personally and professionally by sharing thoughts on professional geography and our roles as wives and mothers. We met in the year 2002, when Anindita came to Norway on a NORAD scholarship. To Ragnhild, already a senior professor at

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