

Engaging Resistance

A Poetic Hermeneutical Phenomenology of Mothering

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Article abstract

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ENGAGING RESISTANCE: A POETIC HERMENEUTICAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF MOTHERING

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Abstract: In this article, I discuss the ways that contending with my own resistance around being a mother while researching mothers/mothering, inspired and shaped a study on maternal self-care. Using Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (2006) as a beginning guide, I discuss how I developed a poetic hermeneutical phenomenology, which emerged as a way out of my resistance and into a deeper relationship with the texts and substance of my project. The purpose of the article is not to present findings; instead, I express my personal and theoretical rationale for the study, offer up my methodology, and provide examples of the poetic performances that steered my analyses. I also reflect upon the ways that I became folded within this project and how my own positionalities affected, and were affected by, engaging in this work. Lastly, I issue a call for qualitative researchers to make explicit our connections to our research, and to interrogate how these connections relate to our goals and gazes.

Keywords: motherhood; mothering; maternal self-care; research poetics; hermeneutical phenomenology

Prologue

Personal and/as Political

This work is, in part, a protest. As a scholar working in public health, I focus much of my attention on issues relating to maternal and child health. Becoming a mother myself made me increasingly aware of the ways in which the field of public health positioned mothers as family health managers (Daniel, 2009), conduits to children's health, and, depending on their social location, irresponsible risk vectors for children (Bell, 2004). Maternal self-care for its own sake is explored very rarely, if at all; discussions on the topic tend to be explicitly connected to effective child caregiving (e.g., to be an effective caregiver, a mother must also attend to their own health). I felt personally, politically, and theoretically undercut by this absence in the literature, particularly regarding how the lack of attention connects with the child/family care-provision tenets of intensive mothering (Arendell, 1999). I was also wary of positioning mothers (myself included) as overly disempowered or victimized, narratively or otherwise; that, I feared, would render us all as two-dimensional as the (implied) insistence that the exclusive function of a mother is to give care to others. Thus, a productive protest was born. I set out to explore how I might contribute to richer understandings of maternal self-care.

I had encountered the data I used in the work I will describe here as part of a previous exploration, and felt it was ripe for further inquiry. My hope was to engage with the original study participants' lived experiences of mothering as much as is possible using secondary data. In this way, I could continue to nurture my protest by staking a research position explicitly designed to trouble (Denzin et al., 2006) hegemonic mothering discourses via a focus on mothers' own articulations of their lived experiences. The purpose of the piece is not to present findings. Instead, I offer up my methodology, and provide examples of the poem performances that steered my analyses.

The Project

Original Participants

The original participants were part of a study investigating the maternal health of urban mothers living in New York City, New York or Greensboro, North Carolina between 2006-2007. Most of the 23 participants were between 30 and 45 years old, reported low/middle incomes, some college education, and had between one and three children. Over half identified as African American / Black; less than a fifth identified as

White. My project drew upon all the available interview and focus group transcripts from the original study participants, i.e., two sets of semi-structured interviews (n=24) and focus groups (n=3).

All participants provided consent for both the original study and for general explorations of the data (allowing for ethical secondary analyses per Heaton, 2008). Because the original study was designed to solicit mothers' accounts of their daily activities and reflections around caring for themselves and others, I believe that the poems I created from their accounts constitute continued general exploration. While poetry offers a distinct way in to and relationship with the original data, the purpose of this project is well aligned with the original study. All study procedures were approved by my Institutional Review Board. In addition, this work was approved by the original researcher, who not only allowed me to access the data, but whose perspectives I sought throughout my analytic process. I could not ask original participants for feedback; however, I regularly shared my impressions about findings and meanings with the original researcher who would offer suggestions and critiques. Occasionally, we would revisit original transcripts together to ensure that my sense-making was consistent with what study participants relayed and the original researcher's notes and memories about primary data collection.

In this way, I attempted to balance the recognition of difference and distance with my sense of mother-to-mother connection with the original study participants. I never met the mothers whose words I read and interpreted; I couldn't member-check. Further, I am a Western, White, middle class, heterosexual, cis-gender woman researcher working in academia. Acknowledging the privilege associated with my identities and recognizing the power of my researcher gaze does not mitigate the effects that these positionalities have on how I understand and make meaning, in this project and elsewhere. I also recognize, as I hope to show in this piece, that privilege and power (like the hegemonies they stem from) are partial; they can be troubled.

Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Hermeneutical phenomenology suggests that knowledges and meanings are best accessed and expressed (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004,) by considering not only fundamental ideas/concepts but how these ideas and concepts are articulated and interpreted as part of everyday lives (Fonow & Cook, 2014). Like all varieties of phenomenology, hermeneutical emphasizes (re)presentations of the essence of a phenomenon. In the spirit of post-structuralism, however, hermeneutical phenomenology also destabilizes essence by underscoring the ways that meaning-making is connected to human interpretations of lived experiences (Laverly, 2003). In

addition, hermeneutics pays particular attention to the way that fragments of narrative are put together as a complex dialectic (Finlay, 2003) to construct whole storylines. A whole story wields power in the form of aggregation, while also being a product of the grouping of partial narratives. Thus, both whole and partial stories must be understood as referents; the way the partial narratives converge into an overarching story is as important as the overarching story itself, and vice versa (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007).

The referential dynamic between partial and whole also extends to the relationship between researcher and researched. As Finlay (2003) notes, part of the hermeneutical research project is “making ourselves more transparent” (p. 108). One central (set of) fold within both the project as a whole and this article, is the way(s) that my resistance(s) to being scrutinized through a particular *mother* lens informed my research strategies. The study methodology and the processes that it set into motion offered a way for me to make myself more transparent, both through staking out differences between myself and the study participants, and through finding points of unity and closeness within our layers (Finlay, 2003) of partialities.

Poetics and/as Hermeneutics

Poetry, with its emphasis on nearness (Ziarek, 1994) provides a unifying structure for partialities without inflicting homogeneity. My poems were integral to my own sense of connection with both the participants and this project. They offered a pathway for (recognizing and claiming my) closeness while also allowing for differences among the participants and between the participants and myself.

More specifically, in hermeneutic phenomenology, essence is not uncovered but is built from ongoing attention to how articulations converge to tell/retell/untell broader stories about human experiences. Thus, the poems both (re)present and challenge essence. Insights from mothers converge and diverge, but always coalesce around the relationships between mothering performances and self-care.

Lindseth and Norberg (2004) suggest that poetic language can provide a way to access, work thorough and “convey the interpreted meaning” (p.151) that hermeneutical phenomenology demands. Indeed, as Nichols et al. (2014) note, research poetics offers a way to embrace and grapple with participants’ diverse lived experiences, while also providing a framework for meaning-making that underscores (re)presentation as a dynamic construction between researcher and researched. That is, research poetics, like hermeneutic phenomenology, has a post-structural feminist bent, resisting a single voice telling a single story. Richardson (1993) frames poetry itself as hermeneutical, noting, “poems can be experienced simultaneously as both whole and partial” (p. 704).

Both research poetics and hermeneutical phenomenology embrace reflexive incorporation and examination of multitudes as a central part of meaning.

Poems

In this work, I used poetry to crystallize both the structure of the study and the analytic insights that emerged through my engagements with the data. While the poems were foundational, that is, they offered central insights about the study and its findings, they were not meant to supplant other analytic activities (e.g., memoing). They were not designed to provide syntheses. Rather, the poems portrayed my readings and renderings of lived experiences, (Pelias, 2005; Richardson, 1992) illuminated the interrogative avenues of the study, and offered knowledge partialities to both guide and reflect inquiry.

Poems and/as Performance

Performative writing emphasizes co-construction and how these co-constructions (between authors and texts) lead to the creation of understandings/knowledges (Pelias, 2005). Slinn (1999) argues that poetry itself is a discursive performance that not only illuminates but also constructs social realities. He writes, “like performatives, poems gain meaning and cultural significance from their function within social contexts and within established cultural discourses” (p. 66). Richardson (1992; 1993) concurs, noting that the act(s) of poetry can be part of both laying bare and challenging the ways that meanings and truths are socially constructed.

Poems and/as Folding

Pelias (2005) suggests that authors who use performative writing are “committed, [and] positioned” (p. 418). That is, performative writing necessarily reflects not only the content of its text but also how an author regards and uses the text as (re)presentation. Performative writing represents a kind of folding—a concept described by Deleuze and Strauss (1991) as the way that text maintains coherence even as meaning shifts based on (re)presentation and/or interpretation—between the meanings of authored text, the meanings of the author themselves, and the combination of the two. Richardson (1992) offers further poetry-specific insight, stating, “poetry can touch us where we live” (p. 26). This indicates another fold in the project: how the poems are received by and resonate with readers (including myself, as I am both author and reader, and other audiences). A third fold that I engaged at the start of the study was the relationships among theory, authorship, and meanings. That is, theory was textually engaged and challenged as part of the study. Finally, the poems themselves offered a take on folding, offering differing,

sometimes contesting, perspectives on mothering both individually and when read as a partial or whole set.

Theoretical Guide Poems

The first set of poems illuminated my preunderstanding (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004) of mothering as gender performance. This section was comprised of three poems formed from excerpts of Judith Butler's (2006) *Gender Trouble*. In the first poem, I showed how gender is positioned as a social performance by using selected quotes from *Gender Trouble*. In the second poem, I asserted that mothering, like gender, is a social performance. This poem is identical to the first, but the word "gender" has been replaced with the word "mothering."

I.

"Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what is at any given juncture in time" (Butler, 2006, p. 22)

"How and where does the construction of gender take place?" (p. 11)

The limits of the discursive analysis
of gender
presuppose and preempt the possibilities
of imaginable and realizable gender
configurations within culture.

This is not to say that any and all gendered
possibilities are open,
but that the boundaries of analysis suggest
the limits of a discursively conditioned experience.

These limits are always set within the terms of a
hegemonic cultural discourse . . . (p.12)
"In what senses, then, is gender an act?" (p.191)

As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender
requires a performance that is *repeated*.
This repetition is at once
a reenactment
and
re-experiencing of

a set of meanings already socially established;
and it is the mundane and ritualized form
of their legitimation. (p.191)

Although there are individual bodies
that enact these
significations
by becoming stylized into
gendered modes,
this 'action' is a public action. (p.191)

There are temporal and collective dimensions
to these actions,
and their public character is
not inconsequential;
indeed the performance is effected with
the strategic aim of maintaining gender . . .' (p. 191)

. . . gender proves
to be performative
—that is, constituting
the identity
it is purported to be. (p. 34)

In this sense gender
is always a doing,
though not a doing by a subject who
might be said to
preexist the deed (p. 34)

II.

*Mothering is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what
is at any given juncture in time*

How and where does the construction of mothering take place?

The limits of the discursive analysis
of mothering
presuppose and preempt the possibilities
of imaginable and realizable mothering

configurations within culture.

This is not to say that any and all mothering possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience.

These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse . . .
In what senses, then, is mothering an act?

As in other ritual social dramas, the action of mothering requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.

Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into mothering modes, this 'action' is a public action.

There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining mothering . . .

. . . mothering proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be.

In this sense mothering
 is always a doing,
 though not a doing by a subject who
 might be said to
 preexist the deed

In the following poem (Theoretical Guide Poem III), I reconfigured excerpts from the second poem to illuminate how mothering is a gendered social performance, offering both rationale and frame for the proceeding poems. In addition to explicating and honing the theoretical framework, this final poem in the set also provided a guide for analytic encounters, showing the ways I approached mothering within the study analyses.

///.

In what senses, then, is mothering an act?

The action of mothering
 Requires a performance that is *repeated*.

Although there are individual bodies
 That enact these significations by
 Becoming stylized into mothering modes,
 This 'action' is a public action.

This is not to say that any and all mothering
 Possibilities are open
 This repetition is
 At once
 A reenactment and re-experiencing
 Of a set of meanings already socially established

These limits are always set within the terms of a
 Hegemonic cultural discourse
 And it is the mundane and ritualized form
 Of their legitimation.

The performance is effected with
 The strategic aim of maintaining mothering;

Constituting the identity it is purported to be.
 In this sense mothering is always a doing.

Participant Poems

I wrote the participant poems using participant quotes from original transcripts. Each line is associated with a single participant. Stanzas may (or may not) include multiple participants. This blended speaker construction arose out of the striking similarities among participants' language/articulations that I noticed when I first read the transcripts. Bringing these articulations together reflected an effort at "strategically mobilizing the language of commonality" (Nash, 2008, p. 4). That is, these poems aimed to unite the participants with each other, unite the participants with me, and unite me with the participants. Differences emerged (or did not emerge) from participants' articulations of lived experiences, not from externally imposed categories (e.g., race, age, income, etc.). I wrote the participant poems with a focus on central contexts and meanings around lived experiences of mothering, then lightly edited subsequent incarnations, with a dual emphasis on improving the aesthetic quality of the poems while maintaining meaning that faithfully (re)presents participants' articulations (per Faulkner, 2009).

Participant poems comprised two sets of study poems. The first set (three long poems) took up and (re)constructed the overarching storyline(s) around the ways that mothering performances related to self-care. These poems (re)presented my first readings/understandings/renderings of broad, overarching contexts around mothering performances and maternal self-care. Per "Theoretical Guide Poem III," this set of poems focused on the individual bodies that enact mothering performances and the ways that these enactments came together (or did not come together) to form *mothering modes*. An example of one of the poems in this set, "Uhh Nothing," appears below. The poem illuminated one mode of mothering, showing the ways and reasons that the mothers in the study neglected, ignored, and/or avoided self-care.

'Uhh Nothing.'

Uhh nothing.
 Not really anything
 I don't really think about me
 I have bad habits, I have bad
 I admit that
 I haven't been taking care of myself
 I even left myself out
 other things get in the way

See I tend to think about

me AND the children,
My income's not where I can do that

You know nobody is concerned about that
as long as everybody's getting everything that they need done
they're not concerned about how healthy you feel today

When you are pregnant they drain everything from you
I mean I've been sick for a month with a cold
And even sometimes I have thoughts sometimes about trying to
find a doctor
A new doctor that would kind of see things going on and help me
And I've been so busy actually lately with my daughter
Everything revolves around your family,
their unexpected friends at the door,
There are times in the day when I just be wantin'
Some 'me' time but I can't get it because she just be like
'it's time for me now.'

I don't mind it but
it's tiring

I'm up early every single day
Trying to survive
I'm working 8 to 5 and 11 to 7
I work in the day and then
I work in the evening
I also take classes
Whether I'm at work or at home I'm always working
I'm always on the run

I don't get to eat I gotta clean up I'll eat
while I'm doing that
Most everything else I have in the refrigerator is for the boys
A lot of the times I cook what they like
I'm just so focused on what they eat
Our eating is out because I'm a single mom and the time
And and
everything
I tend not to have anything healthy for ME
That I can just grab

every now and then I'll get like a banana but I'll usually
never eat it until like 10 or 11
when I'm at work

Just doing everything that I would do
so frustrated with doing everything
I'm just doing this doing that
because at work I'm always doing
what they need me to do there
and then
You know get off go get her
and then
come home and make dinner
then
it's like dark outside
By the time you get home and do
what you need to do at home
Put a load of clothes in

I make sure they do what they need to do
mom can you help me with my homework
and then
my husband just come do this for me or
can you find this and
make sure everything's right with the baby
put her to sleep
I just do whatever I have to do and
I dive in my bed
Because I gotta get up in the morning to
go again

I'm really tired
And usually I'm tired and
I, I feel TIRED
I'm just so tired
I don't know what enough sleep is
Mentally and physically
I'm exhausted

We could be doing something
If I could just carve out that time

There won't be enough time
Time to dedicate
My schedule throughout the day it doesn't allow me time
And you don't have time to do it
I don't have time

Exercising, that's hard because
I got the baby
I haven't socialized a lot
Implementing those things, I haven't really done that

I hate to say it
I'm not used to anything
Anything that anybody did
for me
would be appreciated

I mean I don't get a turn
I can't do for me because I have to do for you.
I just wanted to make sure the kids were OK
Even though I'm not doing it for myself I'm trying to
look out for her future
I don't want her to be like me.

That's why we shut down
That's why we learn to be quiet
And be still
And not have a turn
Because we're so used to caring for someone else's needs
You really don't get a turn as a woman
I realized how much of a stranger I am to myself.

It's almost like people are like well
You're a mom and a wife
you're supposed to.

The second set of (eight shorter) participant poems focused on the construction of more specified thematic meaning by locating and crystallizing subjectivities in mothering performances around self-care. These subjectivities emerged within the broad story of self-care and mothering performances offered in the first set of participant poems. The thematic poems (re)presented the most prominent narratives that stood out

to me while writing/reading/considering the first poem set. Using the participant articulations found in the first poems, the theme poems explored how notions of self-care illuminated more intricate insight into the ways mothering performances related to self-care as well as insight into the lived experiences of mothering performances.

Theme poems were titled with participant phrases to reflect a shift from my own agenda of meaning-making around how self-care is located within mothering performances, to a closer examination of how participant based meanings emerged from my initial inquiries and engagements. While my gaze remained within these poems, the focus shifted from how my perspectives shaped participants' articulations into meaning(s), to how participant articulations shaped my understandings of meaning(s). Per "Theoretical Guide Poem III," this set of poems focused on identifying and raising up the mundane rituals of mothering by focusing on mothers' own complex meaning-making around "always . . . doing" mothering.

When there was more than one interpretation of meaning within a theme, poems were comprised of matched sets of stanzas that appeared in adjoining columns. Each set of matched stanzas contained an equal number of lines. Some lines were longer/shorter, but the text started and ended as one. In this way, the poems performed the construction of thematic meanings while simultaneously underscoring partiality and difference. This does not represent fracture but instead may be thought of as representing a kind of two-dimensional folding, with each set of stanzas offering one folded side of the (necessarily partial) essence of the theme.

The theme poems provided a decidedly hermeneutical perspective on self-care and mothering performances, showing—through an emphasis on partiality—the ways that self-care may be reflected within mothering performances, and how a focus on self-care offered insights around mothering performances. Four of the theme participant poems are presented below. Each of these poems, sometimes with a unified articulation ((re)presented by a single stanza), sometimes with myriad articulations ((re)presented as matched stanzas), focused on how the everyday lived experiences of mothering performances affected how mothers view/(dis)engage/position/etc. self-care.

A Note on Language

Words and phrases often repeat both among and within the poems. This repetition is intentional and provided insight into how the meanings of text (and the ways that text is part of constructing reality) may shift depending on lived contexts. Practically, the textual repetition is part of an analytic strategy in which I used only phrases/language from the first group of participant poems in the second group of participant poems. I used this strategy in order to remain faithful to the participants' articulations

while folding and unfolding new iterations of possible meanings. Three examples of these poems appear below.

Figure 1

Gotta get up in the morning to go again

'Gotta get up in the morning to go again'

I

I feel

TIRED

Ok there is no morning and night with the new baby

I'm really tired

Because he doesn't sleep so I don't get sleep

I'm just so tired

I'm up early every single day

I don't mind it but it's tiring

I'm always on the run

And usually I'm tired and

I'm working 8 to 5 and 11 to 7

I don't know what enough sleep is

It's like 'Mommy...

can Mommy sleep

for another hour'

By the end of the day I dive in my bed

I'm exhausted

Trying to survive.

Figure 2*The time and, and everything****'The time and, and everything'***

There are times in the day when I just be wantin' But I can't get it because She just be like 'It's time for me now'	They wanna see the baby Which is good for me 'Cause that Takes her away for A little bit of time
The biggest issue is time If I could just carve out that time Enough time Time to dedicate	I used to get up at 5:00 in the morning just to Have some me time I make time for myself
I don't have time It's like dark outside By the time you get home and do What you need to do at home Ok it's time to take a shower	I could make time for myself When my children are Up and Walking around and Busy
My schedule throughout the day it doesn't allow Me time Scheduling a time to go You don't have time to do it And if I choose to go to church on Sunday I'm sitting there, 'whew,' Overwhelmed, you know thinking about Monday morning	I do try to do an hour A day I try to get it in 2 times Well Hopefully 3 times A week
My time, my energy I can't do for me because I have to do for you.	I still make time for myself I get to have my 'me' time I have to make time.

Figure 3

You're a mom and a wife, you're supposed to

I realized how much of a stranger I am to
myself.

Because we're so used to caring
for someone else's needs
For women you have to deal with so many things
between
Their husbands or their boyfriends or their children

Being a mother you still know
Pretty much what's going on
Even when you're trying
to take a catnap or something.

We'll always be a mother
I've got to finish raising my kids
Ok, I got to be back.
I've got to get back
Home to my children

Meaning all I'm doing with my life is
Gettin' my kids ready for school
gettin' them off to school and
Puttering around the house until they get home

I can't do for me because I have to do for you.
That's why we shut down,
That's why we learn to be quiet and be still and
not have a turn

Even though I'm not doing it for myself
I'm trying to look out for her future
I don't want her to be like me.

How are you gonna take care
of your kids

When I see a man mistreating a woman now
I am highly sensitive to that
because I had 10 years of that
and I'm just not havin' it
I won't have it for my boys

See I tend to think about me
AND the children
I do want to focus on raising my kids
And not being stressed.

My son can read me
and he was like 'yeah when you sleep later
You're like the best mom'
I felt kinda bad I was like
'wow okay maybe I need to sleep more'

You know what they don't need to see you isolated
They need to see you interacting,
The girls need to know you know
mommy is living a normal healthy life

Children are really in tune
with their parents' emotions and
And they just cling to what you say
I try not to talk in a resentful way

Because they can they can start to feel the guilt and feel
Like they're responsible you know
For my mistakes, mistakes I made

It's not very comfortable doing for yourself or taking care of yourself

Well I'm transitioning from the married world
to the single world
I made the decision to come here
this is MY turn
I'm like really trying to you know have a social life

I'm not Miss Goody Two shoes
I've been misunderstood for years
I'm going back and saying 'I'm human now guys, I need a turn too'
And they're looking at me like 'uh uh...'

How in the world are you going to forget about being a woman
You want to go out on a date
Yeah you want to dress up and feel pretty, feel wanted
You want someone who treats you nice
who makes you feel good

Yeah I went on a dinner date and I had fun
I went to a party and I had, it was
it was good
Dressed up and interacted with people

It's just that there's a point in time
When you need time for yourself or
time for any relationships you have
Outside with your daughter

And if you cannot take care of yourself and your children
You will be calling me|and I'll be on a boat, on a cruise.
I will not be answering my phone

Concluding, Partially

In the final poem, I combined text from both sets of participant poems with the theoretical guide poems, opening the theoretical framework to interrogation. By focusing on the meanings brought via integration with participants' statements, the concluding poem at once challenged and gained meaning from the framework (and, importantly, vice versa). This represents another fold within the project: "a double movement

between theory and data” (Lather, 2009, p. 224), that suggested new knowledge(s) by underscoring the partiality and incompleteness of theory. Per “Theoretical Guide Poem III,” this poem engaged with the idea of mothering and/as legitimation, and explored how lived experiences, when put in touch with theory, simultaneously supported and undermined the macro reading (and appraisal) of mothering performances as necessarily a mechanism of subjugation. Ultimately, the theoretical framework was transformed through its contact with the participant poems; its overarching meaning was destabilized, making way for new meanings. The poem offered a persistent, sometimes weary, call to listen closely to mothers whose experiences of/around mothering performances and self-care subjugate and liberate, sometimes both at once.

I mean

‘Mommy

Mommy!’

Whether I’m at work or at home, I’m always working.

Mothering is always a doing.

I’m always on the run

This action is a public action.

It’s almost like people are like

‘Well, you’re a mom and a wife

Meaning’s already socially established.’

Meaning all I’m doing with my life is

Caring for someone else’s needs

I mean:

I don’t get a turn

In this repetition

Of trying to survive

I feel TIRED.

The performance is effected with

I can’t do for me I have to do for you.

Even though I’m not doing it for myself

I’m trying to look out for her future

She’s looking up to me.

I don’t want her to be like me.

That’s why we shut down

That's why we learn
To be quiet and be still
Within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse

Although . . .
There are individual bodies that enact these significations.

Umm my girlfriends
We always talk about when we feel
A pain somewhere
And I can call and say
I'm coming by to get a plate
So we all sit down and share the pain like
'Ohhh God'

And there's times when I'm like
Oh God
I can't make it
And she's like 'momma come on you can do it;
You can do it.'

I had to look at myself
— Re-experiencing —
If they're the quality of kids that they are
I must be a good person
They are my saving grace
The fruit of what I put in.
It's a blessing.
I do want to focus on raising my kids,
On maintaining mothering.
Get me home
I've got to get back home
To my children;
Their legitimation, that's important.

I'm stylized into mothering modes and
My identity,
The identity it is purported to be,
You know
You have to
I have to

Work at it and I'm working at it and it's hard work
I don't mind it but
I'm tired
And nobody asks you know
It's
Tiring.

Epilogue

My overarching claim is that responsible, ethical (Denzin et al., 2006) qualitative researchers must deeply consider not only how they come to their starting questions, how these questions make demands of theories, and how theories make demands of methodologies, but how our positionalities become folded into our research and how this affects the ways we situate the purposes, goals, and gazes of our work.

Ethical Caveats

My own experiences as a Western, White, middle class, heterosexual, cis-gender woman imbue me with both narrative and experiential power, some of which I can see and know to grapple with, some of which is under-interrogated, some of which remains invisible. These positionalities impact my understanding of motherhood and mothering conceptually and practically. My starting use of Judith Butler, for instance, reflects a specific understanding of and relationship to gender(ing) that reflects a variety of situated identities and performances (Butler, 2020). This necessarily impacts my sense of epistemology as well as what and how I discover (and am able/unable to discover).

Further, if I was able to member-check with the original participants and integrate direct participant feedback, the poems in this piece might be quite different. They might, I acknowledge, not exist in the same forms, nor offer the same content. Not being able to share and collaborate with the mothers whose lives are portrayed in the poems is a weakness of this work.

I continue to wrestle with questions of researcher power and storying ethics in qualitative research. To me, however, this wrestling with both the delineations and the connections between researcher and researched, and the related understanding of my work as not reflection but construction, motivates my commitment to embracing creative, entangled, and challenging work that acknowledges the deep complexities of trying to understand.

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