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MOTHERHOOD IN FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY

Current trends and themes

Kate Boyer

Introduction

Feminist geography now boasts a rich history of scholarship on issues relating to the lived practices of motherhood. This chapter offers a (necessarily selective) overview of key trends in research in feminist geography on mothering and space, focusing on recent scholarship, together with a selection of key theoretical influences in the Anglophone context. Themes that will be considered include: the political economy of mothering; motherhood, identity and difference; mothering and transnationalism; activist mothering; motherhood and embodiment; and mothering with the more-than-human.

The political economy of mothering

Contemporary understandings of motherhood in feminist geography have been strongly influenced by the work of Adrienne Rich on how motherhood is shaped and constrained by patriarchy (Rich 1995) and Sharon Hays’ work on how mothers are expected to be both endlessly selfless toward their children while also being intensively engaged in the wage-labour market under capitalism (‘intensive’ mothering) (Hays 1998). Building on this, one of the key ways in which feminist geographers have engaged the concept of motherhood has been by looking at the gendered spatial dynamics of how wage-work and care-work relate to one another; together with women’s lived experiences of mothering under patriarchy and capitalism. Scholarship in this vein has explored the structural changes under post-Fordism, which have led to much greater numbers of mothers entering the wage-labour market with the dissolution of the Fordist gender contract since the late-twentieth century (McDowell 1991), as well as the spatial confinement and isolation of mothers over the life course across different cultural contexts (Bowlby 1990; Katz 2014; Katz and Monk 1993). It has encompassed the experiences of mothers in the wage-labour market as they seek to engage in both wage-work and care-work (Perrons et al. 2006), including the impact of childcare responsibilities, such as the school run, on labour-market participation and career progression (England 1996; Schwanen et al. 2008).

This scholarship has also produced analyses of the ways in which contemporary understandings of ‘good motherhood’ are underwritten by neoliberal expectations that mothers be responsible...
for the health of their children, leading both to practices such as ‘helicopter parenting’, intended to mitigate risk, and feelings of shame or guilt over failing to meet impossible standards as a working mother (Holloway 1998; McDowell et al. 2005; Pain 2006). Following on in this vein, scholarship has also considered experiences of folding embodied care-work within the time/space of wage labour (Boyer and Spinney 2014) and the interface of motherhood with the sharing economy in the US (Parker and Morrow 2017).

In light of current political realities, recent scholarship is beginning to examine the experiences of economically marginalized mothers and families under austerity budgeting in the UK. Austerity has brought with it cuts and closures to a range of programmes serving low-income parents, such as Sure Start centres, together with new forms of tax (such as the bedroom tax), which hit low-income families hardest. Feminist geographers are beginning to explore how UK mothers are coping in the context of these regressive changes (Jupp 2017).

**Motherhood, difference, intersectionality and identity**

A second key line of scholarship within feminist geography on mothering has explored the variation in experiences of motherhood across time and space, as well as within various cultural contexts. This field of scholarship has highlighted the ways in which practices and understandings of motherhood are shaped by intersecting factors of class, race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and other forms of social differentiation that structure advantage and disadvantage. As this work has amply shown, experiences of motherhood are highly differentiated, both in their cultural context and in the social position/location within that culture. As Patricia Collins noted in her classic essay ‘Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood’ (1994) about motherhood in the 1990s US: ‘For women of color, the subjective experience of mothering/motherhood is inextricably linked to the sociocultural concern of racial ethnic communities – one does not exist without the other’ (Collins 1994, 47). I would suggest that this observation holds a wider truth for the power of culture and social location to shape maternal experience (though, of course, how experience is shaped will depend on the particulars of a given mother’s intersectional social position, and particularly how she is situated relative to geometries of social power and discrimination).

Considerations of motherhood, identity difference within geography have included exploration of the experiences (and sometimes struggles) of lesbian mothers in the UK (Gabb 2005) and Australia (Luzia 2010, 2013), including by exploring how maternal identities emerge in and through embodied spatial practice at various scales of home, neighbourhood and city (Luzia 2010). Meanwhile McDowell et al. (2005) and Holloway (1999) have called attention to the ways in which class structures how mothers are viewed by the state (with more disciplining regimes typically being trained on working-class mothers) and in which normative understandings of what constitutes ‘good mothering’ vary by class and neighbourhood.

The role of the internet in the formation of maternal identities has also emerged as an important line of inquiry in recent years. Through research from the UK and Hong Kong, this scholarship has noted how mothering chat rooms and online bulletin boards can constitute an important source of companionship and emotional support, providing mothers with an opportunity to express uncertainty, anger, frustration and other feelings that they might not disclose to friends offline (Chan 2008; Madge and O’Connor 2005). Though highlighting that such fora typically cater to heterosexual, tech-savvy middle-class mothers, these authors nevertheless note the value of online interactions as a means for new mothers to move between maternal and other, more familiar, identities (see also Longhurst 2008). Further to the theme of conceptual understandings of maternal identity, Gregson and Rose (2000) suggest that maternal subjectivity
can usefully be understood as indeterminate and ambiguous, while Longhurst (2000) observes that within any one mother there are multiple maternal (and other kind of) identities. Extending understanding of the role of new media to the spatial practice of mothering, Longhurst has also identified the role that Skype can play in mothering at a distance (Longhurst 2013).

**Mothering and transnationalism**

Feminist geographers have also been instrumental in instigating a broader turn within the discipline to attend to the gendered politics, spatialities and geo-politics of care-work. In addition to exploring the phenomenon of birth ‘tourism’ through the case of Turkish women giving birth in the US for citizenship purposes (Balta and Altan-Olcay 2017), this scholarship has explored the complex issue of mothering at a distance in the context of women who travel from the Global South (including the Philippines and Latin America) or Eastern Europe. They are economic migrants who travel to work as nannies to look after the babies of middle-class women in the Global North (Cox 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Lam and Yeoh 2018; Pratt 2012). Moreover, this scholarship investigates the hardships faced by co-resident migrant mothers (Gilmartin and Migge 2016). This scholarship has raised critical issues relating to diasporic motherhood spanning the legal and economic frameworks that enable this phenomenon as well as the profound ethical issues, body politics and forms of discrimination and micro-aggressions that it entails and enables.

**Activist mothering**

Another important strand of scholarship in feminist geography is the work of mothers endeavouring to affect social and political change. This work has ranged from mothers’ efforts to claim public space to efforts to shine light on – and change – forms of injustice against mothers and children. Building on scholarship on activist mothering from beyond geography (such as Naples 1998, 2014), this scholarship has ranged in scale from the intimate scale of the body to that of the nation state and across different cultural contexts. Scholarship in this vein has explored mother-activism in protesting against violence to women and femicide in Northern Mexico (Wright 2007) and the work of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (Fluri 2008). It has shone light on mothers’ efforts to challenge unjust and racist patterns of mass incarceration of African–American young people (Gilmore 1999) and mothers’ activism in challenging welfare reform in the US (Gilbert 2001). Work has also taken in the activist work of socially marginalized mothers in Bolivia (Berckmans et al. 2016) and breastfeeding activism in the UK (Boyer 2011). Moving into the realm of praxis, feminist geographers have proposed mothering as a modality through which to approach their professional practice in terms of how to interact with students and colleagues (Datta and Lund 2017) and, through testimonial theatre (Pratt and Johnston 2013), engaged in participatory action research to raise consciousness about the experiences of trans-national mothering in the case of Filipina nannies working in North America.

**Mothering and embodiment**

Recent years have seen an increasing number of geographers engaging with feminist theory as a way to analyse the spatial politics of embodiment. This line of inquiry has produced new theorizations of motherhood as an embodied practice, drawing on the work of Elisabeth Grosz (1994, 1998, 2005); Rosi Braidotti (1994, 2002, 2003); Luce Irigaray (2004, 1985); Judith Butler
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(1993); and others. Scholars working in this vein have sought to give more analytical attention to how motherhood is experienced bodily, as well as to sharpen analysis of how practice and representation relate to one another, along the lines of what feminist theoretician Hannah Stark has called the need to ‘focus on the lived practices that reveal the various ways in which subjects are embodied, located and connected’ (Stark 2017, 66).

This literature has considered how the pregnant body has come under increasing medical and state surveillance and oversight (Fox et al. 2009), as well as in the context of sexualization and pornography (Longhurst 2001). Clement and Waitt have posited how walking with one’s baby can function as form of maternal becoming (Clement and Waitt 2017), while Louise Holt has drawn attention to the concept of *inter-embodiment* as a means to highlight the way that maternal subjectivity can emerge relationally through (often) significant physical contact with one’s baby (Holt 2013). Along similar lines, Kelly Dombroski has explored the affective aspects of mother–baby relations in the form of elimination communication (Dombroski 2017).

Scholarship in this vein has, moreover, included analyses of breastfeeding as a particular form of embodied practice of motherhood. This work has considered the physical pain that can accompany breastfeeding (and sometimes feelings of shame for stopping breastfeeding before planned) (Robinson 2016); the ways that discourses of ‘discretion’ govern and discipline breastfeeding in public in the US (Lane 2014); the embodied experiences and affective environments that can emerge from breastfeeding outside the home in the UK (Boyer 2012); and cross-species breastfeeding (Longhurst 2001).

**Mothering with the more-than-human**

Building on this, the final key area of scholarship to be considered here is that which has begun to explore mothering in the context of post-humanism. This line of inquiry has emerged alongside the increasing interest that has emerged in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century within the discipline in Anthropocene and human–nonhuman relations. Conceptually, this work often draws on theory that seeks to conceptualize practice, emotions, affect and the nonhuman in ways that do not ignore embodied power relations (such as those of gender, race, class and sexual orientation). A body of theory that has proven particularly useful in this regard is that of the new materialism. Composed of scholarship cutting across the humanities, philosophy and the natural sciences, new materialist social theory is concerned with creating analyses that take seriously both discourse and other forms of representation as well the non-representational, including matter, affect and emotion (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2007, 2008; Braidotti 1994, 2002, 2003; Colebrook 2008; Coole and Frost 2010; van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2012). Drawing on a long tradition of feminist scholarship, scholars working in the new materialist tradition seek to give more analytical attention to the politics of materiality and embodied practice, as well as to sharpen analysis of how practice and representation relate to one another.

New materialism also draws on feminist and Deleuzoguattarian conceptualizations of subjectivity as an ongoing process of becoming, highlighting the role of matter in those processes (Braidotti 2002). Within this approach subjects appear, after Braidotti, as: ‘embodied, embedded, assembled of agentic sub-materials within; and through encounters with the material and more-than-human world’ (Braidotti 2002, 62). In the tradition of Haraway (2013), Whatmore (2002), Colls and Fannin (2013) and others, new materialism seeks to destabilize firm conceptual boundaries between bodies and matter by attending to what Karan Barad terms ‘agential intra-action’, referring to how meanings are produced relationally, in and through the relations between phenomena (Barad 2007, 33). As Stark puts it, invoking a Deleuzian frame: ‘the body
cannot be thought of as individual, bounded or coherent because it is constituted fundamentally by the connections it enters into’ (Stark 2017, 75), noting further that ‘these connections do not discriminate between the human and the non-human’ (Stark 2017, 75).

Within geography, scholars have considered the role of the more-than-human in parenting practice in a range of ways. These have included: mothers’ use of family photos to mediate their evolving/unfolding identities (Rose 2003, 2004); the family car as a parenting tool (Dowling 2000); and the place of prams (Boyer and Spinney 2016) and ‘baby things’ (Waight 2014) in the embodied practices of early mothering. Lucilla Newell has usefully proposed the concept of breastfeeding assemblages, which include both human as well as more-than-human components (such as nursing pads, breastpumps, bottles, etc.) as a way of conceptualizing infant feeding that does not ignore the nonhuman (Newell 2013). Colls and Fannin have explored the politics of intra-corporeal matter in their work through an approach that synthesizes both feminist and non-representational approaches to analyse placentas as a mediating force between the body of the mother and that of the foetus (Colls and Fannin 2013); and, along similar lines, Boyer has explored the agentic role of breastmilk within breastfeeding assemblages (Boyer 2018).

**Conclusion**

While necessarily selective, this short chapter has sought to trace some of the key trends and themes that characterize current scholarship in feminist geography on motherhood. I hope to have shown how this field is both socially and politically engaged, while at the same time also engaging with (and helping to define) the cutting edge of conceptual work. At the same time, despite the scope and range of extant scholarship as cultural, political and theoretical landscapes change, there will always be myriad avenues for further work. In particular, more work is needed to understand the spaces, politics and experiences of motherhood outside the Anglosphere and the Global North. Building on extant work, I will conclude by suggesting just a few of the many areas where more scholarship might be done:

The ongoing efforts of mothers to challenge oppressions emerging from intersecting systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism and economic marginalization: Building on feminist geography’s strong tradition of politically engaged and scholar/activist research, more work is needed to better understand mothers’ myriad work as political actors and agents in naming and challenging discrimination, oppression and intersectional inequality across all cultural contexts.

Mothering under the pressures and challenges of neoliberalism and austerity: How have specific political-economic landscapes, as they have emerged over recent years, changed experiences of motherhood? What new challenges do mothers today face in coping under conditions of (in many places) less state support, and what strategies have they devised for coping with these challenges?

The struggles and strategies of mothers and families coping with diaspora and climate change: What does mothering look like in the context of broader forces of global warming, intensifying weather and changing patterns of water scarcity and coastline change? What does it mean to mother as a climate (or other kind of) refugee?

Technological mediation of the spaces and embodied practices of conception and motherhood: The last ten years have witnessed a massive expansion in technologies relating to conception, pregnancy and motherhood, from fertility and pregnancy apps to in vitro fertilization (IVF) and egg extraction/freezing to devices for at-home pregnancy monitoring to the myriad social media outlets in which mothers participate. How have these changes affected how motherhood is understood and experienced? In what ways have they made motherhood easier (or harder?)
More work is also needed on the experiences of mothering (as well as fathering) trans and non-binary children: As transgender rights and visibility increase, how can parents best support gender non-conforming children in (often hostile) wider worlds and public spaces? And finally, more work is needed on broader questions of how the gender of care-work generally and the body- and emotion-work of parenting specifically is itself changing: How, where and to what extent are understandings of the gender of care-work changing? What are they changing to? What new negotiations of ‘who does what’ in the home are emerging across various cultural contexts, and what does this mean for experiences of motherhood, fatherhood and parenthood? What are the experiences of male primary carers, and how can families challenge and break down binarized, normative scripts relating to the work of parenting?

Notes

1 It should be recognized both that the meanings of these intersecting forms of social differentiation change over time and that within any one (intersectional) social location lie infinite forms of difference. Van der Tuin and Dolphijn refer to this as the ‘thousand tiny intersections’ (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2012, 140) that lie beneath any identity, bringing a Deleuzian lens to the concept of intersectionality. This insight serves as an important reminder of the fact that social markers such race, class, gender, and so on can never fully capture the myriad difference within any given identity.

2 Noting also that social contexts are themselves in continual states of flux.

Key readings


References


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