

Editorial

# Introduction: Reimagining ‘Childhood, Motherhood, Family and Community’

Jayne Osgood <sup>1,\*</sup> and Allison Sterling Henward <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Education Research & Scholarship, Middlesex University, London NW4 4BT, UK

<sup>2</sup> Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Penn State University, State College, PA 16801, USA; ash55@psu.edu

\* Correspondence: J.Osgood@mdx.ac.uk

Received: 24 March 2020; Accepted: 26 March 2020; Published: 31 March 2020



This Special Issue acknowledges genealogy as a critical method and mode for tracing power-laden, taken-for-granted assumptions about childhood, motherhood, family and community. Genealogy, as Foucault (1978, p. 139) notes, “operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and re-copied many times”. As such, genealogy provides a critical methodology which allows for a focus on the historical conditions that produce discourses, how they have been shaped in a given time and space, as well as the mechanisms of power that produce and sustain such discourses (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2008, p. 91). Genealogy then, offers a framework that embeds the conceptualisation of things in history; allows irreducible singularities to be mapped; and ultimately, generates a kind of knowledge that radically challenges the modernist framings of studies into family, community, mothering and childhood. Such studies have too often been understood through universalist, modernist lenses in which they become dis-embedded from localised contexts and reinserted within generalisable categories that are articulated across progressively wider tracts of time and space (Foucault 1978). This Special Issue is concerned with presenting alternate ways to materialise concepts and practices that might offer a means to shift ideas about contemporary families, communities, motherhoods and childhoods in other directions. Following Haraway (2008, 2016), we argue that life in the Anthropocene demands a different logic, one that displaces old categorisations and theorisations and so invites an active re-thinking of what kin might be, mean and potentiate. It is not enough to attend to only humanist readings and tracings of what makes ‘family’ or ‘community’. There is an urgent need to recognise the complexity of our times; times that are shaped by material-semiotic entanglements, which have a great deal to tell us about how to co-exist and thrive, if only we are prepared to attune and listen. It is against this backdrop that this Special Issue seeks to intervene and contribute to thinking-otherwise about childhood, motherhood, family and community.

The eight papers that constitute this Special Issue offer engagements with childhood, motherhood, family and community as contested concepts and practices from a range of philosophical and theoretical orientations. Several of the authors (Lavelle; Hohti and Osgood; Blom and Crinall; Trafi-Prats and Caton), in differing ways, put post-humanist logic to work to pose a set of questions that open out enquiries in both the generative and speculative sense. As these papers attest, post-humanist or feminist new materialist approaches are not necessarily in search of a new orthodoxy about families, motherhood and childhood, but rather are driven by the pursuit of ways to undertake research that acknowledges and celebrates uncertainty. These post-humanist enquiries dwell upon the productive possibilities that come from taking matter, affect and bodily encounters seriously (see Strom et al. 2019 for a fuller elaboration). It is only by fully engaging with the complexities and ambiguities that shape life in the Anthropocene that these authors are able to illustrate why we need to grapple with our worldly entanglements through diffractive lines of enquiry. By attending to seemingly unimportant events, objects, happenings and moments that typically make up family life, these authors present deeply

personal, political and worldly accounts that offer the reader exciting provocations with which to grapple. Meantime, other authors in this Special Issue work directly with post-structuralist approaches; some (Miheretu and Henward; Fretwell; and Sotevik) work specifically with the theories and concepts offered by Foucault, to trouble received wisdom and taken-for-granted truths about motherhood, childhood, families and communities. It is by excavating personal stories through interviews and auto-ethnographic approaches, and by offering accounts of the complexities and contradictions that are encountered within contemporary families in various geo-political locations, that the important regulatory frameworks (that persistently contain and subjectify individuals along lines of social class, 'race', age, gender and maternalism) are exposed. Bentley extends this further in her paper by offering a raw and powerful autoethnographic account of the pain and pleasure involved in caring and educating for children belonging to 'other-mothers'. Together, these papers are unsettling and undertake important work to intervene in the dominant ways in which childhood, motherhood, family and community are typically conceived and researched. They offer a stark and timely reminder that the contemporary contexts in which kin manifest are constantly in flux, emergent and ultimately hopeful.

As we, the guest editors, sit on either side of the Atlantic, we find ourselves 'social distancing' with our immediate families. Covid-19 presents global, local and very personal challenges that place us in an uncomfortably dystopian space and time where yet again what counts as family, community and so on is called into sharp focus. We see endless aisles in supermarkets with shelves stripped bare because enterprising neo-liberal subjects have found ways to stockpile and prepare for an indeterminate time when they will be 'locked down' with their 'family'. As schools close, we are faced with the prospect of 'homeschooling' our children, and so, we directly encounter a form of pedagogicalisation and responsabilisation of parenting that Fretwell writes of. The global pandemic that we find ourselves beholden to, and increasingly regulated by, raises questions about our response-abilities, in the Harawayan sense of finding ways of living and dying well together (Haraway 2016) and taking seriously the fact that human exceptionalism is a myth. The discourses and material-affective practices that this pandemic has set in motion reveal how deeply entrenched particular conceptualisations of 'family' are and, yet more, how deeply troubling these conceptualisations are because of what they set in motion. The self-protective parenting practices that this pandemic have unleashed appear overwhelmingly divisive, individualistic, competitive and ultimately self-serving. However, with a different logic, Covid-19 has the potential for ideas about family and community to be reworked. We sense; indeed, we know, that our worldly connections extend beyond our familial homes in ways that cannot be readily charted or accounted for (but which Hohti and Osgood and Blom and Crinall have attempted to address in their papers). Pandemic viruses do not recognise borders, barriers or privilege. Covid-19 is a great leveller that insists that we must reappraise our connections to others (human, but also the non-human and more-than-human). To that end, this Special Issue speaks to the desperate need to tell other stories about childhood, families and communities in the Anthropocene. We have intentionally arranged the papers in a way that weaves different approaches and theoretical orientations rather than grouping them. Interspersing the papers in this way, we believe, is generative; reading them alongside each other or through each other will produce something new; it will incite a pause, a stutter, a stammer—a chance to linger on how else kin might be encountered.

This Special Issue begins with an article authored by Marie Lavelle. She draws on a small-scale study to explore how mothering is produced through ongoing processes of (re)configuring, (re)turning and (re)working. The paper is based upon the material-affective-semiotic memory work of a sample of mothers. Lavelle deploys temporality as a means to shape the paper and thereby recognise motherhood/mothering as entwined, constantly shifting and endlessly resurfacing. By working with Barad (2007) concept and practice of diffraction, alongside Bennett (2010) concern with vital materialism, she explores the temporal nature of mothering. These mothers of grown-up children were asked "what do you wish you had known then, that you know now, about being a parent?" As a means to activate temporal and affective forces, Lavelle made use of objects (from early childhood) as the basis of initial

discussions. As her study unfolded, more spacetime-matterings came to contribute to the generation of complex, multi-layered stories that pushed ideas about motherhood in unanticipated directions.

Next, Kara Roop-Miheretu and Allison Henward offer a critical autoethnography of mothering in liminal spaces. They examine how one mother developed necessary racialised subjectivities as the mother of a child who codes as Black in contemporary U.S. society. While substantial research outlines how mothers of colour must prepare children to live in a racist world, typically, this perspective focuses on the child. Often, it excludes how mothers, both Black and White, must 'do' critical identity work to make sense of this. Although race is a social and cultural construct, when women cross the colour line to partner and have children, the challenges they face both as part of a couple and as a mother are real. Data are drawn from journals and memories, blending self-observation and reflexive investigation to address cultural practices surrounding mothering and subjectivity. Data were analysed using Foucauldian concepts of genealogy, power and subjectification. The findings indicate that this mother was constructed, regulated, normalised and categorised and found to occupy multiple liminal spaces. The authors argue that tracing how particular subjectivities are given power and regulated in specific contexts of mothering contributes nuanced understandings of how race comes to matter, for whom and when.

Taking a post-humanist detour, Riikka Hohti and Jayne Osgood then move on to explore the material politics of in/animacy (Chen 2012), queer kin (Haraway 2016) and a feminist ethics of care (de La Bellacasa 2017) within the family home, by taking robotic toys as an entry point. The authors unsettle and extend understandings of what constitutes the contemporary family in the Western minority world by considering material politics. The authors offer a situated exploration into the caring relations and shared biographies that routinely evolve between children, other-than-human animals and toys within the family home. Child-animal relations are charged with various pedagogical and ideological assumptions, which are absorbed into relations between children and their toys. A close examination of the relationalities between humans and a range of toys reveal that care and liveliness materialise in childhood play and assist in a re-conceptualisation of 'the family'. A specific focus on the materiality of robotic toys illustrates that queer human/animal and animate/inanimate boundaries are reworked and negotiated in childhood play. These processes shift understandings about what matters in children's lives and how materiality and affective forces co-constitute the post-human family. The paper engages critically (and diffractively) with the ambivalences and tensions that emerge within the family home and extend to address inherently political worldly connections that reveal the non-innocence of childhood, family and community.

Next, Simone Blom and Sarah Crinall also work with post-humanist philosophy, theory and practices to attend to the importance of worldly justice, within-ness and women, to reimagine and regenerate communities as more-than-human ecologies. The authors, as women and mothers, look towards time, place, space and harvesting as a multi-species approach to research. They attend to plant species as vital to survival yet recognise that plants are largely ignored and underrepresented in multi-species research. Via Foucault's conceptualisations of power, the authors go on to work with Barad, Haraway and Grosz to ask: "how does growing (with) plant-life, amongst what is 'said' and 'unsaid' matter (to) the world as it turns?" The authors foraged through the childhood-motherhood-nature-community entanglements that connect them. For them, attending to plant-human relationalities enabled new ideas to enfold and energise what constitutes a community. As women woven with plants and scholarship and where mothering is collaborative, the authors invite the reader into worldly, life-giving relations that can be found in a "garden community-undone".

Nathan Fretwell also attends to an examination of mothers as part of ecologies of practice; specifically, he turns attention to those employed as link workers charged with supporting other mothers to become better mothers. He addresses their capacities to exercise pastoral power in pursuit of the pedagogicalisation of marginalised parents. Making use of Foucauldian concepts, his paper is especially concerned to excavate home-school relations, home learning and parental engagement as part of a much broader policy agenda designed to regulate parenting. The article focuses intently upon

a specific parenting support initiative that was distinctive in its deployment of link workers to mobilise 'hard to reach' parents. Such parents are typically framed by deficit discourses, and so, the seemingly common-sense and reasonable call to engage them more effectively in their child's education remains largely unproblematised. Based upon a critical analysis of qualitative data, Fretwell goes on to argue that link worker-parent interactions can be understood as a form of everyday governance and pastoral power. It is through friendship, care and control that link workers exercise pastoral power in a bid to foster responsible, self-disciplined and agentic parents. As local mothers themselves, the link workers are contentiously located but their task for the responsabilisation and pedagogicalisation of the family is powerfully accounted for. Through his analysis, Fretwell insists that new figurations of mothering, meanings of the home and the extent of state intervention into family life must be critically recognised.

Following Fretwell's post-structuralist account of parenting, the next contribution to this Special Issue works with post-humanism to imagine parenting beyond regulation. Laura Trafi-Prats and Lucy Caton pursue an ethico-aesthetic approach to parenting as a means to pursue how else parenting gets produced. They argue that attending to ethics and aesthetics as entwined offers a serious alternative to prevailing neoliberal versions of parenting that have been heavily critiqued for their limiting and containing effects. The ethico-aesthetic approach that they adopt focuses on affect and the intensification of collective life. They work with a small group of parents and their children (all of whom are aged six and under) during a play event: "Moving with Lines and Light". The authors were also participating parents, researchers and players; this unique positioning invited them to think together with fragments of GoPro data and the concept of the ritornello. This way of analysing became an exercise in sensing the non-linear time of parenting in/with the play through a prolonged, active and relational process of recollection and narration, which brought analogic and technologic events together. The authors were hence enabled to explore the parenting body in post-developmental modes of existence as they are organised around sense, territory and technicity that propel thinking about parenting beyond practices of symbolic control. Parenting can instead be conceptualised as living ecologies of action and exploration.

Dana Bentley then offers a very personal and affectively charged account of experiences of mothering in the early childhood classroom. Specifically, through narrative enquiry and analysis, she focuses on what gets silenced and obscured from view and attempts to make visible the forbidden subjectivities of the 'not-mother'. Bentley asks what the role of mothering in the early childhood classroom might be, given the current preoccupation with professionalisation and scientific practices that appear to devalue nurturance and care. Writing as an early childhood teacher-scholar she is troubled by how disempowering it can be to find that there is little to no space for maternal subjectivities and practices in the classroom, precisely because they are deemed to sit in direct tension with concerns for professionalism. She explores a series of autobiographical accounts that critically interrogate the inseparability of mothering and teaching in classroom relationships and communities. Bentley's ultimate goal is to make the reader aware of the tensions and ambiguities that surround mothering as the teacher-not-mother. By making visible the forbidden subjectivities of not-mother, she stresses the importance that it has for early childhood pedagogy.

Finally, this Special Issue concludes with a paper by Lena Sotevik, which addresses how taboo issues in early childhood are refashioned in Swedish preschool policy to preserve ideas about childhood innocence. In a quest to protect children from difficult knowledge, she found that policy tended to focus attention on families and parents, rather than childhood sexual subjectivities. Sotevik undertakes a Foucauldian inspired post-structuralist analysis of the ways in which sexual orientation is fabricated in policy text to reveal a set of troubling issues. Her analysis reveals that 'sexual orientation' is framed by discourses that stress that it is only a matter of concern for parents and therefore should be framed around discussions about family formation. Policy discourses work to limit preschool engagement with issues of sexuality to the inclusion of books and spontaneous conversations about the 'sexual orientation' of parents and (non-)normative family formations. So, the concern becomes very narrowly focused on preventing homophobic discrimination against non-normative family formations and

successfully avoids engaging with children about the ideas they are forming about themselves as sexual subjects, thereby reinforcing discourses of childhood innocence.

Together this collection of papers generates and extends knowledge about childhood, motherhood, family and community as inherently contextual, contingent, conflicting, contested, dynamic, uncertain and, in the tradition of genealogy, socially and historically produced within contexts. These papers draw upon and investigate genealogical narratives that both provide methods of explanation and tracings that facilitate critical inquiry into long-taken-for-granted assumptions. As this editorial has sought to map, this Special Issue is a project of commitments to critical, feminist, worldly knowledge production that actively work to interrogate existing modernist ideas of childhood and motherhood as well as the institutions, discourses and histories that work to limit conceptualisations and practices. The papers collectively contribute to reconfiguring, reworking and regenerating old ideas and practices. The multiple perspectives upon which the authors in this Special Issue draw, in different ways, are intentionally provocative and often generative. Together, these papers demonstrate that pushing towards new considerations allows for fresh engagements and produces new knowledges. The knowledges offered are personal, political, intergenerational, multispecies, queer and more-than-human and so present the reader with novel ways in which to think differently. We invite you to engage with the various accounts, theorisations and provocations that this Special Issue offers to reimagine and re-encounter what kin might be, might mean and might generate—if only we allow ourselves to question, trouble and dwell upon how else it might be.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Arribas-Ayllon, Michael, and Valerie Walkerdine. 2008. Foucauldian discourse analysis. In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. New York: SAGE Publications, pp. 91–108.
- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Chen, Mel Y. 2012. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- de La Bellacasa, Maria Puig. 2017. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, vol. 41.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In *Nietzsche*. Edited by J. Richardson and B. Leiter. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 139–64.
- Haraway, Donna J. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Strom, Katie, Jessica Ringrose, Jayne Osgood, and Emma Renold. 2019. Editorial: Phematerialism: Response-Able Research and Pedagogy. Special Issue: *Reconceptualising Educational Research Methodology*. vol. 2. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.7577/rerm.3649> (accessed on 12 March 2020).



© 2020 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).