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Making Space for Mothering: Collaboration as Feminist Practice

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Making Space for Mothering: Collaboration as Feminist Practice

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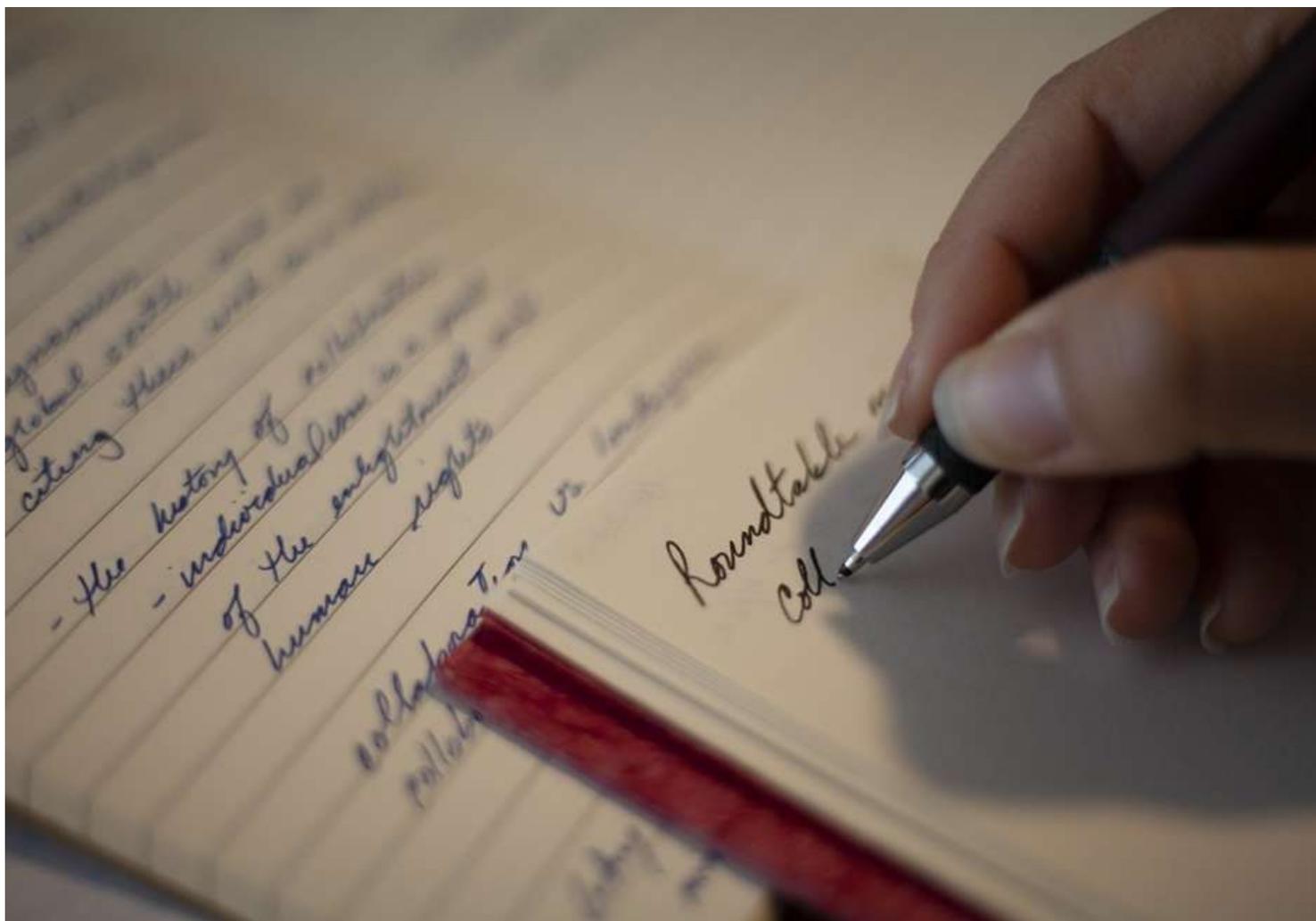


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February 6, 2020

Publication Information

Cite As: Johnson Searcy, Julie, and Angela N. Castañeda. 2020. "Making Space for Mothering: Collaboration as Feminist Practice." Member Voices, *Fieldsights*, February 6.
<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/making-space-for-mothering-collaboration-as-feminist-practice>

Our collaborative practice spans nearly a decade working together on data collection, writing, presentations, and publications as we've explored the intimate care that doulas provide to women in labor. In this essay, we use intimate labor as both a practice and a theoretical frame to think of collaboration as a feminist project that recognizes the expertise gathered from mothering and makes space for it in academia. Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2010, 7) define intimate labor as “work that involves embodied and affective interactions in the service of social reproduction,” and suggest that it requires “bodily or emotional closeness, close observations of another and personal knowledge or information” (2). In our work on doulas, we found that this concept of intimate labor helps us articulate how doula work happens in particular social, political, and economic contexts. Intimate labor also considers how these contexts structure expectations and relationships between those involved in intimate care (Boris and Parreñas 2010). Intimate labor is often invisible or marginalized because of its historic connection to women, people of color, and private spaces. Interrogating the way intimate labor is structured and performed thus allows for insight about class, gender, race, and other power relations. At the heart of our work on mothers, mothering, and the intimate labor of doulas is an understanding of collaborative work as another form of intimate labor.

The connection we saw between intimate labor and collaborative work in our research on doulas resonated with our own position as mother-scholars. We recognize the term “mother-scholar” as potentially problematic. As Sara M. Childers (2015, 115) points out, “the historical and discursive effects of the nature/culture dualism are embedded within it.” She suggests that the term mother-scholar “reproduces the exclusion it desires to repair” within the academy. The term “mother” also carries its own historical baggage, in particular assumptions about class and race. All of these symbolic associations mean that some bodies are considered more “mother” than others. However, mother bodies of any sort are not valued in the academy—unless they are willing to do the invisible care work for free (letters of recommendation, spending hours in office hours with students who are looking for help and

connection, etc.) We see feminist collaboration as one way to make visible the work of mothering in our own work inside and outside of the academy.

Feminist scholars have also written about the “two-ness” of being a mother and a scholar, and sometimes the three-ness, or four-ness, of being mother, scholar, queer, and person of color (Childers 2015). This split subjectivity happens when women have to pretend they are not mothers at work, and pretend they do not work as they mother. We suggest that theorizing collaboration as intimate labor creates productive possibilities for academics who are also mothers or caregivers. In this piece, first we turn to feminist concerns about mothering in the academy. Then, we draw on our collaborative research on doulas and intimate labor to explore the themes of process, vulnerability, and authority in collaboration.

Challenges

The numbers are grim for women in the academy. There is an ever-increasing number of women enrolling in graduate programs, but no equal rise in women holding tenure jobs. The gender pay gap across faculty of all ranks continues to stand, with men making more than women in private and public institutions. But when women are mothers, things get worse. Having a child negatively impacts a woman’s academic career, while having a child is a career advantage for men—the tenure clock in the early years of parenting helps men and hurts women (Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden 2013). Mary Ann Mason, Nicholas H. Wolfinger, and Marc Goulden (2013, 28) found that mothers with young children are “21 percent less likely to land a tenure-track job than women without children and that mothers are 16 percent less likely to end up on the tenure track than fathers.” Only 58 percent of mothers who have a baby early on in their tenure track receive tenure, compared with 78 percent of fathers.

Mothering is a real liability for women in the academy; being a mother can jeopardize careers. Studying mothering, moreover, itself can carry stigma. We suggest that collaboration can be an antidote to these challenges. As mothers and scholars ourselves, a communal and collaborative approach to mothering has often felt like a necessary survival strategy that allows us to navigate care work and scholarship. For example, we edited this article on a rainy summer day with all six of our children running around the house. In the course of fixing structural issues with the article and clarifying the argument we hoped to make, we also gave

out snacks and drinks, refereed disagreements, and calmed a child who had been hurt. Collaborating as mother-scholars means that we could work professionally on a publication, while also caring for our children without having to pretend that we did not have children as we worked.

Perceptions of collaboration in anthropology present other challenges. Miyako Inoue (in Choy et al. 2009) points out the irony of sociocultural anthropology being less open to collaboration than “harder” disciplines given the always social and relational production of ethnography. Anna Tsing (in Choy et al. 2009, 383) similarly points out the way academic structures teach us “to throw our ambition at individual advancement rather than imagining wider circles and more playful interconnections through which contributions might be made.” We have experienced challenges to collaboration during academic job reviews and when submitting applications for grants and jobs. Questions arise from committee members and colleagues not familiar with the strengths of collaborative work—questions that often work to further strengthen an individualistic framework for how research should be done and presented. Collaboration often invites critical reactions regarding the process of data collection, analysis, and write-up. Yet we believe these same limitations or challenges to be the very strength of collaborative work.

Intimate Labor and Collaborative Work: Process, Vulnerability, and Authority

After the birth of our first children in 2008, we separately found ourselves on the path to becoming doulas. It was through this reflexive process that we began making connections between our roles as doulas and anthropologists. This led to our collaborative work on intimate labor and doulas. Together we have co-presented our work at three professional conferences, co-authored two book chapters, and co-edited a volume on doulas (Castañeda and Johnson Searcy 2015). Doula work is often described as mothering the mother, and involves a physical, emotional, and advocacy relationship between women and others. We find intimate labor at the heart of this work and as a useful lens to understand the challenges and benefits of collaborative practices in anthropology. The intimate labor of mothering and doula work require sensitivity, intuition, memory, flexibility, anticipation of needs, weighing of priorities, and attention to detail, which are all qualities which a good ethnographer embodies.

Intimate labor foregrounds process, vulnerability, and authority. To explore collaboration as intimate work, we draw on our own research with doulas to highlight the parallels between doula work, mothering, and co-authorship in the academy.

We observed how doulas support women and their families as they do the embodied work of bringing a baby into the world. Doulas acknowledge that birth is just one moment in a much longer process; birth, in this view, is a rite of passage, each phase with important collaborative opportunities to consider. In their work, doulas dance between reading the cues of a woman in labor, directing her partner to hold hips or offer a drink, reminding a nurse of a mother's birth requests, speaking to nursing staff in the hall to track down extra pillows, and so on. We aim to carry this collaborative energy into our academic work, as illustrated by our collaboration across the processes of research—from brainstorming to data collection, analysis, writing, and presentation of final products. More specifically, we have divided up the responsibility of interviewing participants, which has enabled us to use each other's networks in order to reach a more complete sample of the doula community we were researching. We also identified themes and coded data together, as well as shared roles as facilitator and note taker during our focus groups with mothers who had hired a doula for their births. This collaboration led to richer analysis and more complex theoretical arguments as we wrote up our research.

In our research and work as doulas, we also found intimacy in the shared knowledge and awareness of personal vulnerability throughout the birth process. One practicing doula described it this way: "In birth, you are completely and utterly vulnerable. To have a woman there who is compassionate, loving, intuitive, knowledgeable about birth, and has your best interest at the center of her heart . . . that's part of what I do. To have that person with you makes that woman come out of the process more whole and not more harmed. No matter what the outcome [of the birth] is." As mother-scholars balancing three interwoven strands—as mothers, as scholars, and as scholars of mothering—we found that our collaborative work requires a level of intimacy, personal vulnerability, and trust that in the end was a strengthening element to our personal and academic lives. Working collaboratively meant bearing witness to the fits and starts of ideas and to the roughest of drafts. Collaboration offers a space to build academic arguments in an atmosphere of exchange rather than a solitary echo chamber. As mother-scholars it allows us to recharge and breathe amidst other

mothering challenges such as lice outbreaks, difficult pregnancies, or parent-teacher conferences.

Just as doulas describe their work as “holding the space” for a laboring woman, so too do we find collaborative work a way of holding space for one another. An example of this intimate collaboration is best illustrated in our 2013 presentation at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in Chicago. We made the long drive together, each of us traveling with a baby just a few months old. The night before, as we tried to review our notes, we balanced cranky babies and the restrictions of a small hotel room with the need to practice our presentation. As we prepared to chair our panel and present our work on doulas, we gathered not only our notes and computers but all the necessary baby gear. We strapped our babies across our chests and made our way through the narrow hallways at the hotel, arriving sweaty and tired before we had even started to “work.” We relied on each other for confidence when met with unfriendly stares and for support to nurse our babies when and wherever necessary. Presenting our authentic selves meant bearing witness to the vulnerable moments of mothering, and our collaborative work created the safe space necessary to be successful. In academic spaces, collaborative work provides a safe space where vulnerabilities associated with mothering can be acknowledged and normalized and recast as a form of resistance.

These collaborative spaces also work to help us question and unpack notions of a single authority. In our work with doulas we found a model of care that disrupts a doctor-centered approach to birth by re-centering the woman and her knowledge of her own body. Mothering, as a space where we are often confronted with “good” and “bad” ways to mother, entails multiple forms of authority. Yet, what our research seeks to emphasize is the embodied and everyday lived experiences of mothering that expand notions of single authority. This framing extends beyond traditional binary constructions of what mothering should look like to include more diverse racial, ethnic, class, and transgender experiences of mothering. We argue that our collaborative approach to both mothering and our research on mothering revalues both the ideas of “looking several ways” inherent in the practice of mothering, as well as emphasizes “multivocality as a productive outcome of collaboration” (Choy et al. 2009, 399). In our research, we both experienced the ways in which authority is questioned and collaboration is scrutinized in academia. In our experiences on the job market and under

review for promotion, we had to “make the case” and attempt to quantify our labor for our co-authored work. Like doula work, we argue that anthropology is always a collaborative process and to not recognize this would be to continue with the illusion of “solitary fieldwork,” a notion that we argue is both patriarchal and obscures and devalues other kinds of knowledge production.

Conclusion: Collaboration as Resistance

Just as we suggest that “the kind of intimate labor undertaken by doulas provides opportunities for embodied resistance in response to homogenizing models of birth” (Castañeda and Johnson Searcy 2015, 138), we also see collaboration as pushing the boundaries within our discipline to include more diverse ways of doing and knowing. By utilizing intimate labor as a framework to unpack collaborative practices, especially those related to mothering, we are drawing attention to a type of labor that is often invisible or unrecognized. As Koni Benson and Richa Nagar (2006, 583) write, “Collaboration is a complex and powerful tool that can be developed . . . to forge alliances and re(de)fine methodologies that seek to reconstitute the norms, structures and content of feminist knowledge and political agendas in anti-hierarchical ways.” Our collaborative work on mothering seeks to continue to push the boundaries of mothering and work as well as push back on the limitations associated with being a mother. Ultimately, our work as mother-scholars involves traversing and negotiating public and private spaces—spaces where we need to value the forms of knowledge produced from the intimate labor of collaborative work.

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