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Introduction

Motherhood is probably the only job from which one can rarely, if ever, resign. Once you are a mother it's a done deal and there is no turning back. I do not know of any mother who would not attest to this claim. But this book is not about the work of motherhood. It is not about the celebration of motherhood. It is not about the recognition of motherhood either socially or economically. This does not mean that I do not consider these issues important. I do. I explicitly and implicitly affirm these invaluable of motherhood as a thread that weaves its presence through this book.

This book is about women who are middle class, who have some form of access to child care, who live in a democracy and who have strong legal rights and protections. It is about the freedoms that we have not yet achieved. It is about liberating thinking. More specifically it is about academics who are mothers. The academic mother constitutes a unique duality. We are engaged in intellectual work that traditionally has been the domain of men. Thinking, over the centuries, has been described by Western philosophers as rational, unemotional and logical. At the same time this very woman is a mother and mothering is traditionally associated with nurturing, loving, emotion and sensitivity. I endeavour to inquire how perceived oppositional identities, the academic mother, live within the same person. My study is conceptually underpinned by the argument that intellectual work, thinking, epistemology, new ideas, in other words the work of the academic, should strive towards inscribing motherhood into the fabric of being an academic.

From the theological foundations of medieval philosophy, to the humanism that permeated the Renaissance, to the certainties of science and mathematics of the modernist era, to the celebration of reason, law and human progress of the Enlightenment, to the positivism of the 19th century and the postmodernism of the current age, the silences with respect to mothering are deafening. It is as though philosophical concerns, ethics, morality, God, social values, social arrangements, economic arrangements and political motivations are simply abstracted from mothering and that

mothering really has nothing to do with any of these social concerns. What would the single mother who was denied a legal abortion because the far right needed a viable political campaign that appealed to the public sense of godliness, whose child support grant had been cut because budgets for arms deals were growing bigger, who stole from the women whose children she looked after while her own were left to the vicissitudes of townshipⁱ life, who took in an occasional lover knowing that she risked being beaten up, what would this woman have to do with any of the deep philosophical concerns espoused from antiquity to postmodernism? Apparently nothing if we are to believe philosophical writings. Is it surprising then that Rousseau, the man responsible for the *Social Contract* on which the French call for liberty, equality and freedom, the principles of the French revolution, were based, left his children in foundling homes because he could not think with the noise and disturbance of children, while Buchi Emechetaⁱⁱ (1974) a novelist from Nigeria thanked her children for the background noises they provided while she wrote? Is it surprising then that Socrates in his last conversations before his death asked his wife, she being the only woman present, to leave the room because such lofty discussions were not meant for women. It is no surprise too that in January 2005, Harvard President, Lawrence Summers, in announcing the creation of a task force to develop concrete proposals to reduce barriers to the advancement of women at the university, in the same breath made comments about the innate differences between men and women, and not surprisingly drew much vitriolic responses from the community of academic women in particular.ⁱⁱⁱ That men's thinking about women's thinking has not changed is not surprising; that women's thinking about women's thinking is showing little sign of change is frightening. As Ruddick (1989:194) puts it, "there is nothing intrinsically masculine about mind and objectivity or anything feminine about passion and physicality. Nonetheless, philosophers have tended to associate, explicitly or metaphorically, passion, affection, and the body with femininity and the mind with masculinity...We are so accustomed to this association that we may be insufficiently puzzled by it". I take this puzzle to heart.

I also take to heart Wise's (1997:121) concerns about the "bifurcated existences" of women academics, what she calls the "Jekylls and Hydes of academia". In describing her own bifurcation of being a female and feminist academic she says:

... one and a half hour journey that separates my home from my work, my home from my professional self. The disjuncture that I feel between my self and my self in academe therefore starts with a physical and practical manifestation....My 'work' self sleeps in a different bed, drinks different water, engages with different people, from my 'home' self. In this parallel universe I endeavor to be a different person because everything and everyone that I interact with, and define myself by, changes (Wise, 1997:120-121).

It is this bifurcation of self that I believe is destructive to women academics, particularly academic mothers. It results in potentially paralyzing fragmentations of thought and being. I endeavour in this study to oppose such fragmentation and to take up Noble's (1990:5) evocation that "women need a new mythology, a new way of thinking about who they really are, what they can become,... a mythology which empowers us to claim, not suppress, our femininity". She goes on to argue that creating a new mythology would require courage and risks.

My first steps towards courage were to confront and talk about my own motherhood, a step I had been reluctant to take for years. Indeed there were many moments during this project that I wondered whether the study was a means to avoid talking about my motherhood and of deflecting its impact. Perhaps it was. Perhaps the only way I could speak about it was by externalizing motherhood, by speaking of someone else's than my own. I do not know. What I do know is that my motherhood was the path the led me to this study. As such I could no longer avoid it. The joys and the pains had to be confronted. I knew too that once I had written what had infused and permeated all of me for almost ten years^{iv} the words on the page would be unavoidable.

When my first child Kiara was only a few weeks old, I was asked whether I liked motherhood and my instant response was an unequivocal, 'No, but I love my child'. The response had been spontaneous and intuitive. I had not thought much about motherhood. All I knew was that I wanted a child and that I finally had one. But as my words were out, loud and hanging about in the air, they could not be avoided. On numerous occasions in

the course of the years to come, I thought about my words and was amazed at how accurate my response had been. I did not like the sense of unending responsibility that consumed me, I did not like waking up in the middle of the night, I did not like the endless routine of nappies and feeding and kept my sanity by focusing on the fact that such tasks would end at some point. In the course of performing these chores I had often thought about my dislike for the chores. I realised I had no guilt about it. But I loved my Kiara. I saw Kiara in many ways as an extension of myself. Even when she was born and on the outside and in the world, I felt she was still part of my body and self. I simply did not conceive of her as separate at all. Intellectually and emotionally I had separated the chores of taking care of a child and had defined these as motherhood but saw loving as having nothing to do with the chores of motherhood. I also knew that whether she was with me or not, Kiara walked around inside me. I don't know whether it had anything to do with the fact that I had waited many years for her and she had wedged her place in my heart long before she was even conceived.

When Tahlia was born two years later under the most emotionally painful circumstances, motherhood took on a whole new dimension that I had not bargained for. While she was still *in utero* Tahlia had been diagnosed with hydrocephalus^v. I was told that she could be anything from a complete non functioning person to a fairly 'normal' one. The simple chores of feeding and night time wake ups had assumed an unexpected complexity with Tahlia. I did not think about my motherhood at all any more. I did all I could for her. My simple distinction between motherhood as chores and loving seemed to make no sense. Indeed I don't think I even thought about what motherhood meant anymore. I found myself in an almost trance like and somewhat functionalist state of unrelenting nurturing. I remember the endless visits to all kinds of doctors. I remember fighting them to the point where one wanted to have me evicted from his rooms by the hospital security. This while I was carrying Tahlia and was a most unlikely threat to anyone. I remember a period of two months, when between Tahlia and Kiara, I had made seventeen visits to various doctors. I remember too feeling alone through all of this. I remember shopping for groceries with two trolleys – one with two kids and the other with food.

Most of all I remember the sheer hard work and effort it took to be mother. But I also had a vague memory of a person who had done and still wanted other things too.

My love for Tahlia took the form of an overwhelming desire to see her become an independent girl and to hold her close as much as I could. I desperately wanted to make up for the curved ball that she had been dealt. I still do. As I write this I am consumed by tears and I know that I will never be able to talk about her without being weepy. I also know that that is okay.

Today Tahlia is a bright eight year old with a mild, though frustrating physical limitation. She has limited use of her right hand and being right handed she feels the frustration all the time. She is also aware of her difference in a profound way. Her facility with words is impressive and today she is learning French and siSotho. To look at her now belies all the pain, trauma and sheer hard work that went into being where she is today. Aside from my own feelings, I am every moment conscious of Tahlia's struggles with her emotions and her hard work for herself. I am conscious too of the emotional demands Kiara faces as Tahlia's sister.

In thinking about my motherhood today, I am aware that while the early tiresome chores are over, the impact of mothering, of caring and of loving have never left. For me mothering happened in my head, my heart and infused all of me. I see now that it was not simply about the chores. My first recollection of change in my self after becoming a mother occurred when I realised that I could not watch the Godfather movies I had previously enjoyed. All I could think of as I saw someone being beaten was that he was someone's child!

The next turning point on my motherhood road was when I had decided to do a PhD. I had not given this much thought and had fairly casually happened upon the idea because it seemed more convenient and sensible than the MBA I had originally thought of. When the PhD group met for the first time and we were asked why we wanted to do a PhD, my answer, surprising even to me in the face of the lofty aspirations of my classmates, was

that I was looking for someone beyond the age of three with whom I could chat. So armed with my somewhat low key aspirations, I began my PhD as a full time student when Tahlia was three and Kiara five. My PhD became a way to reclaim a space for a self that I often had difficulty locating in the daily chaos of motherhood. My job was boring. Motherhood was emotionally and physically exhausting. I needed to find a more inspiring space. Without consciously realising what I sought I embarked on this new journey of healing.

So when I was asked at the completion of my PhD how I managed to complete my thesis while being a mother, my response, similar to my response about loving my child but not motherhood, was that I was able to do my PhD *because* I was a mother. I was very surprised at the question as I thought the answer was fairly self evident. As the question came to me from many more colleagues and friends I began to think more deeply about my response. I wondered whether I had done the PhD because it was a means of escaping the daily grind of motherhood through a PhD? The same could have been achieved though a good job but despite the possibilities in this regard, I did not chose that. Had I escaped the daily grind of motherhood? Not really. The daily grind, in other words, the really tiring chores, were gradually lessening by this time. I also had an excellent nanny, Madika, whom the girls loved. In many ways she and I shared mothering. The girls, Madika and I had a fairly organised and good life even though we all went through the trauma of divorce by the time Tahlia was four.

I wondered whether I had indeed left my motherhood behind each time I went from home to office. But there was much to show that I could not. I thought about Kiara as I analysed my data. Each time she used a word incorrectly, and I corrected her, she told me quite confidently that that was the meaning she gave to the word and that was what it was going to mean. My point that nobody else would understand her countered for nothing at all. She said that since she had told me the meaning, I would understand her so there was no problem. Now when she writes spelling tests, Kiara spells it like she hears it and when I encourage her to learn the correct spelling, she laments the fact that Grade Four has made her ask the question, "Is this all there is to life?" I sometimes ask the same question

to! Tahlia adopted the same intellectual position as her sister when her vocabulary grew and innocently explained meanings of words she used to me whenever she thought I needed help. Of course I stubbornly corrected them and it took me a while to let them be. When I got to my data their words troubled me, because of the sheer simplicity and audacity of their convictions, and because I was aware of my own power in meaning making each day. Besides, hadn't Humpty Dumpty told Alice that a word could mean anything he wanted it to mean and that he could tell her the meaning of a word just like that even if he had not heard it before? That fact that Humpty had fallen and could not be put back together made the consequences of meaning making more daunting.^{vi}

The girls entered my work space in other ways too. I missed numerous meetings and other events because of them needing me. In the second year of my PhD I was employed by the university where I was studying and so had to fulfil some, though minimal work requirements, while I wrote my thesis. Sometimes, life became chaotic because there was too much to do and mothering is hard. At these moments, I shouted at my girls, felt really bad about it, let my work slide but eventually got over it. When I sat down to write, I was happy. I loved writing. I loved research. I loved my girls and all these elements of me seemed to find a way to cohere in harmony. At the time I experienced the contentment amidst the hurly burly of bring up two little girls. I had not given this feeling any real thought. So when my friends and colleagues said "how did you do it" I was truly surprised. When I heard this comment for the umpteenth time, I knew I had stumbled into research I wanted to do. I wondered to what extent we consciously or unconsciously left our motherhood outside our academic and intellectual doors? I wondered to what extent, if at all, academic mothers did their intellectual work in ways that they thought they should or in ways that they wanted. I wondered whether we were a bunch of people whose selves were consistently fragmented as we went through the day. And I wondered to what extent we were complicit in such fragmentation. And so began the journey of *Academic Mothers*.

In taking Noble's (1990) injunction to be courageous, I sought to explain how it was possible for me to complete a PhD and be a mother and not see these as contradictory and

conflicting responsibilities. I wondered whether I was an aberration as a mother, someone who did not feel torn between studying work and motherhood. I wondered whether it was the sense of freedom I had since being divorced that allowed me to deal with these responsibilities with what appeared to be ease? It was Sally, a participant in the study, who asked me to explain how I managed to be academic and mother. Once the question was asked so explicitly I could not circumvent it by studying other academic mothers!

Having allowed herself to be so intensely researched by me, I owed Sally, the other participants and myself, an explanation. I laughed and teased her that she was smartly making the researcher into the researched. We agreed to meet for lunch to chat. It was possible for me to talk a little about myself at this point as my participants had told their stories and I had managed to get through the hard parts of this chapter. I spoke about some of the practical things that made motherhood and academia work for me. The first was that I had a good nanny in whom I had total confidence. I told her of the emotional release I had after my divorce. I liked having control of my life and that such control gave me a sense of calm. I told her too that as I had read her story I felt vitalized by the strength of her relationship with her husband and that my singular state, thankfully, was not a prerequisite for mothering and work. Most importantly, I spoke of how my mothering resonated with my ways of thinking. When I had a chapter to write, research questions to figure, data to analyse, a story to tell, I usually mulled things in my head for a while, thinking about it at no specific times or places and perhaps in somewhat haphazard ways. The data, the thinking, hung about me for days and I read for days until the compulsion to write became apparent. And I would write. I mothered in much the same way. When really difficult moments arose, when decisions had to be made, options played in my mind for some time, I would chat to friends and family and then I would make a decision. In both instances, I rode the wave of my decisions and faced the intellectual and emotional consequences as they came. That did not mean I never changed my mind or that I never had doubts. But having children, especially Tahlia, put all of life, mothering and intellectual work into new perspective, allowing me to see the bigger picture as well as the detail. It was not because I felt sympathy for Tahlia but because I had to see and accept that that was simply who she was and that life went on. I told Sally

that the practice of letting thoughts, feelings and ideas simmer in my self before I put them outside me was the way I functioned most of the time. As I spoke with her I realised that part of what I was seeking to do in this study was to give theoretical form and shape to an intuitive intellectualism.

I realised too that the calm that my colleagues saw in me and what they perceived as the ability to cope with being an academic, mother and PhD student belied much of the daily trauma's I had faced. Some traumas were intense given Tahlia's condition. It seemed that while my girls had infected my internal spaces as an academic and mother they rarely occupied my public profile. I had friends and family who saw how hard it was to bring up the girls. I also had my PhD which gave me a sense of self worth and which helped me to not feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities of being a mother. When I read Sally's story, I realised that like her, I rarely presented the agony of decisions I made or actions I had to take. As for all three participants in this study I too prioritized my children. I felt no qualms about that, did not feel deprived as an academic when I could not attend certain meetings or travel as much as others did. I was aware that like Sally I defined my own sense of success and felt no compulsion to rush up the ladder of institutionally defined achievements. Like Ann I too suffered a deep sense of guilt for Tahlia being born with hydrocephalus. I have realised the futility of asking why or with torturing myself with 'if only'. I gave up guilt because it made murky the love I gave to Tahlia. I did not want that for her. Like Sue I have learned to share mothering. Perhaps I have unconsciously found enriching ways to be an academic mother. So while I have tried to set aside my own motherhood by researching other mothers, what this study demonstrates is the immutable links between my own experiences of mothering and being academic and those of Sally Sue and Ann. The paths we have chosen as academic mothers often merge and conflate and we recognise ourselves in each other. We also see our differences. Perhaps a difference between me and the participants in this study is my sense of wholeness in being academic mother. It is these recognitions and differences that I think are worth theorizing and worth talking about more closely in order to give more form to being academic mothers.

To do this I turn to the substantive data on which this study is based. I draw on the stories of three academics who were first time mothers and whom I interviewed over a period of eighteen months. In explaining my project to them I said that I wanted to understand how mothers who were academics tried to negotiate their academic selves and their motherhood. As a starting point I asked all three to talk about their experiences of mothering and work, to talk about how they made their decisions, to identify crisis moments, to share their feelings about themselves as mothers and as academics. For each conversation I drew on the previous and tried to keep the continuation and flow of their experiences, feelings and thoughts. I also drew on my own experiences of being an academic mother.

In discussing the methodology (Chapter 1) that underpins this study I focus on a single methodological decision: my choice of three white woman academic mothers in the racially diverse context of South Africa. Two key factors motivated this decision. The first was that the practice of white people doing research on black was becoming tiresome. I sought to offer the relatively infrequent occurrence of a black woman doing research on white woman. The second was that in choosing three women from the same racial category I sought to attenuate the external noises created through the variable of race, that could potentially intrude into the analytic space of academic and mother. In other words I wanted to foreground the academic mother as the substantive variables of the research and to mute as far as possible the analytic credentials of other potentially intrusive variables.

In Chapter 2 I show that the literature on motherhood and work is mainly about how women balance these two lives. Yet I also reveal the early rumblings of academic mothers who point to the dissonances between their assertion of reason as in the western philosophical tradition and their experiences of mothering. In drawing on these stories of academic mothers, I show that ontologising the difference between being academic and being mother perpetuates the 'two lives' notion of academic mothers. I argue that academic mothers need to re create thinking in ways that inscribe mother and academic into a sense of wholeness. I take up Foucault's (1997) discussion of subjugated

knowledges as a platform for understanding marginalized knowledges. One such knowledge, I argue, is in being mother. I suggest that academic mothers need to inscribe this knowledge into their intellectual work, that leaving aspects of the self outside the intellectual door is self defeating.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 tell the stories of Anne, Sue and Sally. Each story is organised in ways that seek to reveal the teller more eloquently. Anne's story is centred on the journeys she takes and does not take. Sue's story is underpinned by a series of events that expose the merging and separation of spaces of mothering and spaces of intellectual work. Sally's story is told in ways that set the presentation and enactment of decisions against the turmoil of making them while maintaining an appearance of calmness. While I try to give separate and distinctive expression to each of the three participants, I also pay particular attention to the complementary value of the three stories. As such I focus on the *struggles* of all three to be mothers and academics, such struggles being both internally located and externally expressed via family and work relations and contexts. Another complementary value to be found in all three stories is the strong presence of *growth* and *change* in each of the participants. For all three perceptions of growth and change as mothers and academics are personally recognized and articulated as well as manifest through actions and decisions.

In Chapter 6 I set the stories of Sue, Sally and Ann against the conceptual underpinnings outlined in Chapter 2. I make four analytic observations. The first is that balancing motherhood and work is not achievable and should not even be sought. My argument is that the notion of balance implies an equilibrium and harmony which the experiences of the participants in this study and others deny. The second is that feelings of guilt appear to be implicit and expected in motherhood. I link understandings of guilt to my third observation, namely, that motherhood should not imply the ownership of nurturing. I argue that it is this self and socially imposed expectation that women have ownership of nurturing that sets us up for feelings of guilt and inadequacy. The responsibility for nurturing is phenomenal and taking this on alone is self defeating. My final observation is that the participants reveal in various ways a changed way of relating to their work since

motherhood. In particular I draw on their struggles to bring in and leave out their motherhood from their work. I argue that this struggle is about new understandings of intellectual work and thinking. More specifically I make the case that it is not a struggle about drawing emotion or motherhood into thinking but about implicating and inscribing such aspects of self into thinking, into epistemology, into scholarship. Put differently, thinking needs to be liberated from the limits of reason.

The last chapter brings Sally, Sue, Ann and I into conversation with each other about the book. At this point all three had read the book (except for the section on *Reflective and reflexive infinity* in Chapter 2). I make no analysis here and the conversation is presented largely as it took place. My effort in this chapter was to bring us together as academics and as mothers. I wanted to lay bare a conversation in which we spoke as academic mothers, to give expression to my claim for wholeness of thinking and for the conversation to give substance to the methodological plan of reflexively somersaulting into the text.

Finally, I see this book as a beginning rather than an end or outcome, or as ‘findings from the data’. I want to start a different conversation about feminism without underestimating the value of conversations past and those that continue and exist alongside this. As I write this book I do not think of it being read by far away people in far away places. I think of Sally, Ann and Sue reading it. I am mindful of them and of their families. I think of my own children reading it. I am mindful of them too. These are the voices that guide and people my writing.

ⁱ I use the term township as a South African descriptor used to indicate an economically poor African (that is black South African of African origin) area. It is usually densely populated with houses often being makeshift or very low cost.

ⁱⁱ See her novel, *Second Class Citizen*.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Harvard University Gazette*, 17 March, 2005, p1. For further information, see *Slate*, 28 January, 2005.

^{iv} My older daughter Kiara was ten years old as I wrote this Introduction.

^v Hydrocephalus is the condition caused by the accumulation of an abnormally large amount of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) in the skull, or cranium. Normally, CSF flows continually from the interior cavities in the brain (ventricles) to the thin subarachnoid space that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. For Tahlia a possible blockage of the flow of CSF caused some damage to brain tissue on the left side of her brain resulting in impaired functioning of the right side of her body.

^{vi} Lewis Carroll (1832-1898). *The complete works of Lewis Carroll*. Random House, The Modern Library, New York.p208-221.