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Introduction

Is the affective experience of public parenting a health concern, a concern for the medical humanities? Certainly, the constant surveillance of parents, mothers in particular, is born out of care and concern for the well-being of children. This surveillance and the interventions/invasions it inspires, however, result in a slew of anger, shame, and, later on, "ugly feelings," to use Sianne Ngai's phrase. The aftermath of public intervention is less attended to: how parents interpret these moments and how they lead to "negative affects," states of being that are born out of "a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social" (3). In negotiating public scrutiny and their child's needs, as well as gender norms, mothers often experience what Ngai calls an "increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society;" she urges readers to attend to the implications of "situations of passivity" (3).

In this piece, we—mothers—try to do something like Ngai describes when it comes to reading two memorable moments of parenting in public. Instead of retreating into shame, and then anxiety and paranoia, we think through what a reparative narrative might look like. A different kind of narrative about what mothers should do and who they should be. In *Small Animals: Parenthood in the Age of Fear*, Kim Brooks writes of the ramifications of leaving her four-year-old son in the car for five minutes, and in that time span having a stranger record her and call the police. Although

Brooks' situation is dramatic, she writes, "I felt, I think, what just about every woman feels whenever someone attacks or criticizes her mothering. I felt angry. I felt embarrassed. But beneath all that, I felt ashamed" (33). In this piece, we not only attend to anger, shame, and other "ignoble feelings," to use Ngai's phrase, but to the less dramatic feelings and narratives that haunt mothers after these episodes—how these ever-present feelings impact the health and lives of families (3).

We argue that the *stress* on parenting bodies results not only from pregnancy, childbirth, and (in some cases) nursing, but from collective narratives: The public expectation, for example, that the mother is always *there for* the child, a child who looks calm, obedient, quiet, and pleasant. A disciplined, domesticated person as opposed to the wild, animal body from which we all come from and begin as. These damaging and violent expectations have to do with relationality, being-with others in public spaces. For this reason, navigating this topic is complex. In this piece, however, we aren't asking what *rights* mothers, children, and the people around them have when it comes to occupying certain spaces outside the home or among others. Instead, we explore the bodily impact of narratives about children and public parenting, narratives that, in turn, affect future bodily responses; health; and whether or not one *feels* the right to occupy certain spaces. In doing so, we read our own experiences closely and end with an attempt to map out a better world —better narratives—for mothers, all kinds of parents, and their children.

Mira: The Finger-Wagging Woman on the Plane

The finger-wagging woman who admonished me on the plane for my inability to control my toddler's meltdown did not know that we'd been traveling for days. Unmoored, frazzled, and exhausted, we were making our way back to the US after weeks of pilgrimage to our countries of origin—him Greece, me Lebanon—with a toddler and a baby. She did not know that I was in the throes of postpartum, that a week earlier I banged my head on the wall in my despair.

The finger-wagging woman who shamed me for causing disturbances in the cabin—*everybody is complaining back here*—did not know that our journey back to the US had started the previous day, first a rocky boat ride from one tiny island where our relatives live to another. Then, a turbulent propellor plane flight and finally a sleepless overnight stay in Athens. She did not know that just before we boarded, I was separated from my distressed children and my partner for a "randomized" extra screening that took more than half an hour to be completed. It is not exactly *randomized* when I have been selected for this extra screening every time I entered the US without fail. The woman who chastised me for my toddler's antics did not know that I was already marked as other, always suspect, always scrutinized, and that I was reeling from my performance of helpless subservience to the American state. To cross borders as a woman of color is not an easy breezy affair.

The finger-wagging woman did not know. Or maybe she knew and did not care, her need to put me in place more urgent, my humanity already questioned by the apparatus of power. I often wonder if she would have yelled with the same sense of entitlement had I been a white woman. Did the border agent's lengthy screening make me an easy and disposable target for her rage?

She accosted me mid-aisle, as if telling me and every other passenger *she is in our way.* As the woman repeated her admonishment, my anxiety grew (gut-wrenching). I yelled in a crescendo of shrieks and profanities. I sobbed hysterically (stomach-churning). I unravelled (raw). The "situation," as the aircrew called it, happened at the beginning of a very long flight. I had to live with my shame in close proximity with the person who caused it for nine hours.

I would describe the feeling for you, but even now the memory is unbearable, the humiliation I felt so hard to talk about. It was the most cinematic moment of my life, and I sometimes replay it in my mind with close-up shots, slow-motion moments, the camera panning away, leaving me alone.

But at that moment I could not even dwell on my emotions, let alone the cinematic flair of this incident. My baby was hungry. There was no time to feel sorry for myself (guilt)—no time to process my rage, no time to linger on my public outburst of ugly feelings. I nurse and sob at the same time. My milk, my sweat, and my tears mixed together in my shame-stricken bosom.

What social contract allows people to police mothers, touch their bodies when they are pregnant, bestow unsolicited advice, exercise control over how and what their children feel? What makes mothers the default receptacle of people's fury and frustration, especially when airborne? What gives people license to restrict a woman's mobility? Why can't I visit my family?

After the incident on the plane, I do not trust myself anymore. I do not travel to see my family. My eldest asks me where *teta* and *jeddo* are. But why can't I go back to both my country of origin as well as the incident on the plane? Why it is hard to go back there? The answer is shame. My shame consumes me. It lives in my body.

How exposed, how humiliated, how raw, I understand now.

Alicia: The Woman Who Followed Me Home

On a particularly cold and windy day in NYC, my daughter won't get into her carrier. Because of the subway system's notorious accessibility problems, this means we cannot take the subway as usual. Instead of forcing Evie into the carrier, I put her in the stroller to walk the mile instead. She wears her coat and hat, but mittens have been a challenge this winter: They don't fit or she pulls them off, and I give up because I'm exhausted. I usually hold her little hands in mine or wrap her up in my oversized jacket instead.

If I was thinking clearly; if I wasn't a first time mom; if I wasn't in a rush to make the most of one of my two full work days a week; then maybe I would've thought of something more creative to keep her hands warm in a stroller.

I didn't, and we are almost to our destination when Evie starts to cry. I feel her hands and they are ice cold. We are in public; in the middle of a residential sidewalk; and I desperately try to figure out what to do. I take her out of the stroller and wrap her in my coat, but she won't stop crying. I pull an extra pair of pants out of her backpack and wrap them around her hands, but she won't stop crying.

I realize I have to get her inside immediately and try to put her back in the stroller, but she refuses (a toddler who is melting down is stronger than I ever expected).

But as I panic, my main goal is not to get Evie's hands warm—it's to get her to stop crying because I am ashamed; because my body rushes with adrenaline and my chest tightens when I hear her cry; and because I know what comes next. As I try to carry her and push the stroller while rubbing her hands and talking to her, telling her we are almost there, I hear a voice, *the voice*, materialize behind me:

"She's cold."

I turn to look at the woman who has paused, in New York City, to declare this and say "thank you," curtly, before turning around. But the woman doesn't move on. As she stands there watching us struggle, a million different feelings rush through my body—anger, shame, humiliation, sadness, and helplessness. My daughter and I become a spectacle. I cannot figure out how to proceed under the watch of this woman.

So I say, "Please fuck off."

(The please, the pleading. To be seen as a human being in this moment and not just a conduit for my child's comfort and safety.)

Once I get Evie to daycare, I go through this process all over again with her caregivers. As one puts a warm washcloth over my child's hands and warms some milk for her, she explains: "It might not feel cold to us walking, but if you're just sitting in a stroller it's a different experience." I nod there and then cry on the way to work, even after I'm sent a picture of Evie eating breakfast happily. In the weeks to come, I constantly look for other parents with children Evie's age to see if their hands are also exposed, or if they are wearing mittens, wondering if it's just me.

It's not, it wasn't, it isn't just me. I know that intellectually. But in reflecting on the first and only time I've sworn at a stranger in public, I think of the male professor who accused me of discriminating against him because he was childless. I think of the male professor who, in passing, said, "I hope you don't bring Evelyn on planes." And I think of every single mother and child I've seen in Park Slope, Brooklyn—in parent-baby yoga, in the toddler park, in Key Food—who have looked peaceful and put together.

That woman, who stood still shaking her head as I struggled to get my daughter warm, never left. She followed me home that day, and she was with me before and is still with me. She lives in my body as a narrative, as a truth—that I am not good enough to do the hard and thankless job of "mothering." Different mothers and therapists have excitedly explained the concept of "good enough" mothering to me, which I understand to mean pleasing that woman as best you can and moving on. I'm not as excited about this shift in perspective, because it's not really a shift. The

same narrative is played and replayed but I—along with all of the other responsibilities I carry—must learn how to not feel *so* bad when I fail to please "that" woman.

I want a different narrative. I want a different narrative because narratives live in the body, your viscera. You can't turn away from them. You can't tell them to "fuck off." More often than not, the stories the body lives by don't even play in the conscious mind, but your stomach still clenches up; your heart rate spikes; your face grows hot; and your head bows.

I suppose that, when a story feels too old, too big to take on, friends, loved ones, therapists, etc. can only think to tell you to try and turn away from it, or create distance from it, or recognize it's an illusion.

But the body remembers.

Conclusion: Making Room for Anger, Making Room for Mothering

We are well aware that it is much easier to identify a problem than it is to propose solutions. Upon reflection, there have been many moments when strangers have responded to our struggles with public parenting with compassion, generosity, and joy. It's harder to remember these instances, though—instances of relief. Sometimes, for example, people will notice a mother struggling with a stroller and hold the door open for her. When people do this for me, Alicia, a strange mixture of relief and apology floods my body as I push the stroller through the door. "Thank you so much," I always say. One day, a woman takes a moment to look me in the eye and say, "It's nothing. Stop. This is nothing."

Is it?

As mothers ourselves, writing this piece, we have asked: whose job is it to educate the public on mothers' humanity in these situations? Of course, no one *likes* to hear a baby cry or a toddler scream, but for parents these cries create visceral reactions in the body. The moments in which parents are panicking—trying to calm and soothe a child when they know they are under public scrutiny—are *not* opportunities for education or admonishment, the route strangers so often take. In thinking through a solution, Kim Brooks asked a friend with older children: "How did you get through it?" Her friend responded:

"You know, I think after years and years, I learned to stop giving a fuck. If people I knew, friends or relatives or strangers or whoever, had an opinion about what kind of mother I was or wasn't, if they thought I was making mistakes, or doing things the wrong way, being too this or that, being selfish by not giving all of myself to my kids, I eventually decided, fuck 'em. I'm doing the best I can in a culture that offers parents little material or emotional support. If people have a problem with the way I'm doing it, fuck every last one of them. And it's funny—that anger—that was what got me to a place where I could finally stop caring and enjoy the little monsters. That's when I started feeling better."

Brooks' friend's advice acknowledges the situations we described above, as well as advice we have both received—to simply stop caring. But what we hear in the quote above, beyond anger, is exhaustion. Anger takes energy—it drains the body, it distracts from the various kinds of labor parents, especially mothers, must do to keep their jobs; to keep their families functioning; to keep their children alive. We wonder if learning not to care is really exhaustion in disguise. We desperately want a narrative that is more empowering. We do not want platitudes: "enjoy every moment," "it gets better," or "hang in there"; instead, we want a narrative that allows women, especially, to rage, gives them space to heal, offers a venue for their feelings to be validated, and their needs to be supported. We are not asking for a more accommodating public, but for a wider or more expansive assemblage of what mothers are allowed to be and to feel, in public and beyond.

What would a narrative look like that allowed a move from anger to calm instead of anger to shame to the ugly feeling of numbness? To "stop caring"? Dare we imagine a community where all kinds of bodies, all mixed emotions, can co-exist in public spaces? In *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs calls for a radical yet obvious plan of action: "In order to collectively figure out how to sustain and support our evolving species, in order to participate and demand a society where people help to create each other instead of too often destroy each other, we need to look at the practice of creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life that we call mothering" (9).

We close our eyes, breathe, dream.

In a feminist utopia, all kinds of parents or people "mothering" would be perceived, attended to, and recognized equally in public. In a feminist utopia, women and gender nonconforming parents would have the tools and space to mother themselves and comfort each other—expressing love, joy, vulnerability, empathy, and trust. In a feminist utopia, people who have been pregnant would have space to celebrate their ever-changing bodies and grieve them, too. In a feminist utopia, caregivers would have childcare, healthcare, and full autonomy over their bodies. The "woman," or person, who follows us home would see and accept who we are instead of who we are not.

But beyond the ideal, the ambition, the abstraction of a feminist blueprint—in the here and now—is kindness. Immediate kindness. Every word we say, every act we perform, pushes us to or away from it, day in, day out. You can choose to look differently at this body-hating, spit-covered, sleep-deprived person coaxing their child to do this or that, or not do this or that. Choose kindness. Choose empathy, its potential and its spirit. Let's ritualize a world of mutual expression, celebration, and care for all bodies, animals or otherwise.

Featured Image: Georgia O'Keeffe (American, 1887-1986). *Ram's Head, White Hollyhock-Hills (Ram's Head and White Hollyhock, New Mexico)*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 30 x 36in. (76.2 x 91.4cm). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Edith and Milton Lowenthal, 1992.11.28 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 1992.11.28_PS11.jpg)

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