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abstract

This paper is an attempt to elaborate two concerns: those of maternal ethics, and notions of making things public. I attempt to bring these two concerns together and think them alongside one another, in hopefully productive ways. I want, in other words, to think about the ethics of what mothers 'make public', whether this is understood in its most rudimentary form, of enabling a child to express something, to make public an affective state, for instance, even if it is only the mother who is there to witness or receive it, through to more overt and material forms of 'publication' glimpsed when mothers parent in spaces we call 'public'. This paper focuses on what happens to us all when we encounter 'mothering' – not in the enclosed, private, secluded spaces where we imagine mothering to take place, but in what Marc Augé has termed the 'non-places of supermodernity', where much of the day-to-day material practices of mothering in Western late-modern urban contexts actually occurs. As is often the case, it is when experience is dislodged from the contexts in which we expect to find it that its contours are shown up in relief, and we are called on to re-configure our understandings of experiences in ways that also shift our understandings of the contexts in which they occur. In this sense, mothering, that I am claiming 'makes things public', as well as occurring frequently and importantly 'in public', not only shows up something we may overlook about the maternal, but also deforms and reforms our understandings of 'the public' itself.

keywords

maternal subjectivity; maternal ethics; motherhood; maternal publics; public space; affect

introduction

This paper is an attempt to elaborate two concerns: those of maternal ethics, and notions of making things public, and to think them alongside one another. I want, in other words, to elaborate an ethics of what mothers 'make public', whether this is understood in its most rudimentary form, of enabling a child to express something, to make intelligible an affective state, for instance, through to more overt and material forms of 'publication' glimpsed when mothers perform their mothering work in public spaces. This paper intersects with broader concerns about what the maternal both draws out and reveals – the ways it challenges, queers and contests our understandings of subjectivities and identities more generally; understandings of embodiment and relationality, thought and affectivity, norms and desires, singularity and multiplicity, dependency and autonomy, of the state we call childhood and the precarity and transitory nature of adult states of mind (Baraitser, 2009). As such, it also represents a continuation of a commitment to thinking psychosocially – of refusing a distinction between social and material practices and affective and psychic modalities, seeking always to articulate their mutual co-production (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008).

At its simplest, we could say that what mothers make public are the ways we are collectively and affectively tied to one another, and that we are all born into this dependency that constitutes the ongoing agonies of childhood and later adult life. A psychoanalytic reading of our encounters with the maternal in public may suggest that it is this primordial dependency that must be defensively covered over at all costs, along with the mother who 'makes this public'. As Judith Butler puts it, 'attachment in its primary forms must both *come to be* and *be denied*, its coming to be must consist in its partial denial, for the subject to emerge' (1997: 8). For Butler, this particular way of *coming to be* accounts in part for an adult's sense of humiliation when confronted by their earliest objects of love. From this we can read out to the intense contradictory and split associations with the maternal; from idealization to denigration, from being represented everywhere to being theoretically conceived as the zero-point of both subjectivity and thought, and as a figure in the urban landscape we tend to look right through, until, that is, we become one.

From a more sociological perspective, maternal work has been understood as a form of emotional labour traditionally associated with the private sphere (Parson and Bales, 1955), in which mothers manage, handle and contain the emotions of others within a kinship group, and provide refuge from the tensions of the public sphere (Morgan, 1996). In Western contemporary conditions the carer–child dyad remains one of the main sources and sites for the production, management and regulation of 'kinship emotion' (Nairn, 2007), and primary carers, whether they are biological, foster, or adoptive carers, through to the range of those who

perform maternal care work, remain predominantly female.¹ However, it is not just that mothers manage the emotions of others, but that one of the main sources for the production of kinship emotion continues to be the maternal figure herself. Following on from this, if one aspect of emotional labour entails facilitating the subtle processes of *detachment* of such emotion from its original sources so that multiple emotional attachments can be forged, then this raises thorny and well-worn issues for accounts of maternal ethics and subjectivity. How do mothers enable such a necessary detachment, in what contexts, and with what effects, especially for mothers themselves? A notion of the 'given' of kinship emotion, and the ways it is tied to the maternal continues to underlie the contradictory cultural edict that mothers must be constant in their passionate commitment to their children, while also knowing exactly when and how to facilitate a separation from them, so that the 'caring and clinging' mother that Julia Kristeva (1987: 34) famously warned us of can give way to a loving mother who is loving to the extent that she is prepared to let go of the child.

1 I use the term 'mother' here to denote anyone who both identifies as female and performs primary maternal work, with a 'child' being understood as the other whom such a 'mother' elects, names and claims as her child.

The affective ties of childhood are currently confined more and more to enclosed domestic and institutional spaces (literally the home and especially the school), while simultaneously being relentlessly 'exposed' in the heavily mediated public spaces of reality TV, cyberspace, and print media, with the familiar schizophrenic movement between the private and public that has become part of globalized neoliberal culture. This dynamic is captured beautifully in Lauren Berlant's articulation of the 'intimate public sphere' (Berlant, 2008), in which publics are produced and structured through genres of intimacy, which in turn deform our very notions of the private and intimate. I want, however, to map some alternative spaces that are produced through maternal encounters in public. The spaces I wish to map are tangential to the 'local' spaces of home, neighbourhood, or community that have traditionally been assigned as female spaces, and neither do they constitute the wider domains of 'the public' that feminists and queer theorists have systematically critiqued as white, middle-class, heterosexual and heterosexist spaces (Valentine, 1989; Doan, 2007). I want to argue that there are spaces that are produced when maternal work strays from the local, but does not quite arrive at the spaces of employment, decision-making or authority, emerging instead through the everyday use by mothers of a variety of other, or transitional spaces with their children in tow. If the spaces of the local correspond to what Nancy Fraser (1989) might call 'weak publics', and those of authoritative decision-making to 'strong publics', then the spaces I am seeking to map may correspond to what Fraser names as 'counter-publics' (1997); spaces that contest the singularity, normativity, and bourgeois nature of Habermas's public sphere (1984, 1989). To this end, this paper seeks to make visible 'maternal publics' in which kinship emotion is both transformed and deforms these transitional spaces in which it arises.

In attempting to think maternal ethics and the public together, I want to continue to indicate ways to approach maternal ethics that are neither descriptions of maternal masochism (an ethics premised, however implicitly, on the necessity for a mother to put her child's needs and desires before her own), nor essentialist (what we might mistakenly think of as intrinsic or essential to the maternal, despite enormous and continuing cultural pressures to think in these terms). To conceive of a maternal ethics is not to describe an ethics 'in the feminine', one, for instance, premised on capacities to nurture, care, preserve or contain, but to think about what is generative about motherhood for mothers and the maternal itself; what comes back from the encounter with the other who is a child, and that might therefore constitute what we could properly call 'maternal subjectivity', and hence open the possibility for a generative account of maternal ethics (Baraitser, 2009). To this end, my interest is not just in the effects produced by encountering mothering in public, but also to approach this question from the perspective of the maternal – to stay attuned, that is, to what these encounters are like for mothers, what they mean to us and what forms of fragile and intricate ethico-political subjectivities arise for mothers, as well as for others, when we perform mothering work in public.

maternal places

There is a complex set of relations between the city, public space and the maternal. Much early work by feminist geographers highlighted the extent to which public spaces, especially spaces in cities such as streets, transportation or parks in both Western and non-Western cultures, were less likely to be used by women due to harassment and violence, or fear of harassment and violence (Valentine, 1989; Massey, 1994; Madge, 1997). The construction of women as dependent and in need of protection has further decreased women's rights to freedom in public spaces (Pateman, 1988). More recent geographical work on gender, ethnicity and the city has elaborated the ways in which the 'private' space of the home can be just as much a space of fear, harassment and violence, or simply of control and lack of freedom for women, so that home and public spaces within cities are understood to operate to similar effect through the continuation of patriarchy (Fenster, 2005). This is a view that directly challenges Lefebvre's early but uncritical notion of the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991). Cities are places where public spaces are nevertheless significant (McDowell, 1999), and the link between the public and polity means that they are also places of huge inequalities, places of 'power geometry' (Massey, 1993) in which different social groups and different individuals are placed in distinct ways in relation to the flows and movements that constitute social life.

While much of this scholarship has focused on gendered bodies, discussions of the maternal in relation to cities and public spaces has been more concerned

with mapping the immediate localities of childcare (e.g. Hill, 1987; Bell and Ribbens, 1994; Dowling, 1998; Holloway, 1998), rather than the relation between the maternal and public space (Aitken, 2000). This may be in part due to the ways that mothers themselves are conceived of as 'place' – the unthinkable and unnameable place we come from and return to, Kristeva's 'ambivalent principle ... that stems from an identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnameable that one imagines as femininity, non-language or body' (Kristeva, 1977: 161–162). This makes the relationship between the maternal and public space problematic; conceptualized as this ambivalent principle, she is out of place in public space, to say the least.

Public space is not identical with notions of 'the public'. Although we commonly talk of 'the public' in the singular, it is by definition a form of gathering (whether literal or virtual) that gives rise to the expression of *the general*, or *the anonymous*, a peculiar collective whose parts are infinitely replaceable. And coming from the opposite direction, mothering in contemporary Western contexts is a practice that has the specific task of enabling the emergence of individuality from the generic. A fundamental aspect of such parenting practices is the way a child is related to as a specific child, 'my' child, chosen out of all the other swarming children, and how a child reciprocates this gesture by choosing out their 'mother' from the 'swarm' of other mothers. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) develop a notion of 'packing' or 'swarming' in *A Thousand Plateau*, which occurs through processes of alliance rather than filiation. Filiation describes structures of sexuality and reproduction that remain within fixed binaries, such as the Oedipal structures of parent/child, whereas alliance works through rhizomatic processes that are antithetical to such Oedipal structures. We could think of mothers who recognize that they belong to loose amorphous groups as a bizarre version of the pack – given that mothers are usually associated with its opposite (the Oedipal familial structure that Deleuze and Guattari seek to overturn). And where there is a pack, Deleuze and Guattari tell us, there is always an exceptional individual, the one who is anomalous, who sticks out from the pack. The anomalous refuses the norm: 'neither an individual nor a species; it has only affects, it has neither familiar or subjectified feelings, nor specific or significant characteristics' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 244). Every pack has 'a borderline, and an anomalous position, [...] such that it is impossible to tell whether the anomalous is still in the band, already outside the band, or at the shifting boundary of the band' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 245).

Much discourse on infancy underlines the importance of the way a mother helps a child to feel 'specific': The psychoanalyst Harold Boris, for instance, writes about infants who for some reason appear to be born with an idea that they ought to die. What these infants need from the 'breast', he says, is some reassurance:

What I think it wants to hear is: There, there, it's all right, you'll do, not to worry. This is different from a feeding, however munificent, and it has to be personal, not general. [...]

The cure needs to be a personal, not a general, reassurance. By this I mean the baby is going to need to be sure that he or she is known; otherwise it will suffer all life long from the idea it is an imposter and in danger of being horribly unmasked. (Boris, 1987: 353–354)

These babies seem to need mothers who ‘choose’ them out of the general, and in doing so, move them into the personal. To be elected by a parent as a child is the name for a process that moves us all from the generic towards the specific. In some senses what mothers make public then, is a classic philosophical question of the relation between the example and the exemplary, where examples are paradoxically caught between having something in common with other manifestations of the same phenomenon, and so in some way being alike and indiscernible, but as also having to be *exemplary*, something utterly singular and remarkable. Maternal practices, through taking place in public, show up the publicness of the public by revealing the anomalous, what remains distinct from the swarm. Mothering in public tells us less, perhaps, about relationality, dependency and affectivity, and more about these complex processes of *gathering* that constitute the public as such.

When we stray from the local, and yet fail to fully appear on the scene of the institutional, civic, or ideological, we are somewhere in-between, a place akin to what Marc Augé has described as the ‘non-place of supermodernity’ (Augé, 1995). For modernity, the present contains within it the past that it supercedes, but that constantly defines it, so that ‘place’ in a modernist sense is that which is relational and historical and can therefore give rise to identity. In contrast, ‘a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place’ (Augé, 1995: 77–78). What Augé terms ‘supermodernity’ breeds such non-places – supermarkets, airports, hotels, motorways – places of transit, places of too much information, too much space, that paradoxically give rise to new forms of solitude. Although Augé’s non-place has been criticized by feminists who contend that space is always the product of material and embodied social relations (Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999) and never somehow ‘outside’ the specificities of historical location, what is appealing about non-place in a discussion about the maternal is that it immediately dislodges mothers from their traditional role as the fantasized origin of identity, relationality and personal history themselves. And yet, because the maternal can also be understood as an ethically constituted relation with a dependent other that cuts across notions of solitude, the maternal necessarily deforms non-place; the visibility of maternal work makes her ‘out of place’ in non-space, as she labours away in the streets or cafés of advanced capitalist global cities, in buses or on the escalators of tube-stations, in large public spaces such as leisure centres, civic squares and shopping arcades, in the aisles of supermarkets, and the transit points between the supermarket and car park, the car park and cash-machine, the cash-machine and train station. These are not, after all, the immediate localities that women are supposed to become imbedded in when they

become mothers, and through which mothering can, and often is experienced as a shared endeavour that creates home, neighbourhood, and community (Bell and Ribbens, 1994; Holloway, 1998). I am not here describing the playgroup, for instance, the crèche, the children's playground, the library, the post-office, the doctor's surgery or even that peculiarly overdetermined stretch of street outside the school gates. I want to argue that when mothers inhabit non-place, they produce a reverberation that constitutes a particular form of publicness.

In what follows, I try to think about what mothers make public through a rudimentary analysis of some maternal anecdotes drawn from personal experience. These anecdotes are chosen because they are both examples of, and exemplary of, ideas that I have tried to lay out so far; they both act as examples in a useful way, and at the same time they make trouble for me in my desire to illuminate something about the maternal, because of their utter singularity. This quasi-methodology is in keeping with what Jane Gallop describes as an 'anecdotal theory' (Gallop, 2002), a form of writing that takes the recounting of an anecdote as its starting point and then systematically mines it for theoretical insights that it does not, at first glance, appear to warrant. The bringing together of something as 'serious' as theory, with something as 'silly' as anecdote is a deliberate procedure, one that attempts to side-step the more seductive pull of narrative, in favour of the more minor pleasures of the incident, or incidental. It is through an analysis of the overlooked mundanity of maternal experience that emerges through the anecdotal, that we can perhaps approach this relationship between the specific and the general, between the maternal and her publics (Baraitser, 2009).

auto(e)motive encounters

I want to begin with a peculiar non-place – that of the car. To start with the car is to start with a space that is neither public nor private, but transitional, half-way between the domestic space of kinship emotion, and the more overt non-places of contemporary urban life. In addition, the car provides a take on the psychoanalytic encounter, another key place where kinship emotion is detached from its original sources through the workings of the transference, one I have described elsewhere as 'redundant' and yet staging the possibilities for 'liveness' through a practice of waiting for something to happen (Bayly and Baraitser, 2008). And the car in the city is a space of maternal work that captures both a mother's capacity for movement, for fluidity, for gathering, as well as her necessary viscosity; the site of her stuckness in public space, in traffic jams, in the monotony of the school run, in the dead space of the parked car.

When my first son Joel was about two, our car died. It was already half dead when we got it, being old and well used, and the flavour of death was enhanced by the

ghost of its former owner, a friend's father who had died and gifted it to her in his will, knowing full well that she didn't drive. Having gratefully received this sadistically infused object ourselves, locked as many of us are into a state of contemporary time starvation which makes the car a seemingly necessary tool for the continuation of complex maternal routines that must include paid work, maternal work, domestic work, and different forms of community work including other caring responsibilities, I was intrigued to see how quickly my son made an attachment to the car. It took me many months to get over my aversion to the form of mothering I was myself engaged in, in which my son spent literally hours of each day strapped into this warm, vibrating, jolting, smelly, nylon-lined metal box. Right from the start, he has been auto(e)motive, affectively and intellectually developing, that is, in relation to the particular material, spatial and temporal dimensions of the automobile. A child doesn't necessarily know about journeying, but they do know about the quality of the present. For some part of each day, my son had an experience of automobility that included dozing off in the car, watching the world go by at certain speeds, the play of light as that world moved past, the experience of that restricted form of play we could call car-play, and of the audio-visual auto(e)motive landscape that is constituted by car-music and car-talk.

And then, when the car died, he quite clearly went into mourning. He cried as if he had lost something or someone very dear. He wouldn't get into the new car. It smelled and looked and felt and tasted different. Most of all he complained it was just too big. He talked incessantly about the old car, worrying about where it had gone to now it had died, whether someone else would have it, or whether it would be squashed up and turned into something else, or just left somewhere by the roadside, or even, he hoped, buried.

Many children make attachments to what we can surmise to be echoes of early womb-like contained spaces – their buggies, slings and cots. They function like transitional spaces, both familiar and strange, 'unchallenged' spaces between reality and fantasy, opening opportunities for what Donald Winnicott terms 'play'; for explorations, that is, of a range of me/not me phenomena (Winnicott, 1971). Their particular sensations and associations can be experienced with great passion and intensity. And in keeping with thinking about the car as a transitional space, I want to draw the perhaps obvious and rather mundane parallel between cars and psychoanalytic spaces. Their development was, after all, coterminous, the Ford Model-T coming into existence in 1908, a landmark year for the popularization of the car in the US domestic market, and the same year as the formation of the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society. Unlike the buggy, cot or sling, the interior of a moving car can be maintained as a quiet, intimate, and sealed off space, set apart from the world outside. Nowadays it is compulsory for a child to be strapped into a specially designed car seat that is itself strapped to the back seat, so that the physical relation with the mother

is both formalized and fixed – she herself is strapped into the driver's seat and cannot easily turn around to attend to a child's needs; she cannot easily transgress the boundaries. She can see the child's face in the mirror, but a small child can not see hers. An asymmetrical, materially and temporally constrained space is maintained, and like in psychoanalysis, a peculiar dialogue appears to emerge; at times a free association or babble; at times an exposure of intimate matters, things that can not get said at bedtime or bathtime or playtime or supertime; at times a space of eruptive affective exchange in which fury and despair circulates but without being expressed in the usual violent thrashing, dropping down, or kicking out characteristic of the contemporary tantrum. The very fact of journey time being otherwise redundant (I can not cook, clear up, write an email, work, talk on the phone, or do anything else, for that matter, while I'm driving) seems to allow a form of affective exchange to emerge between mother and child. In analysis the non-conversation between analyst and analysand is premised on the asymmetry that is the condition of the transference; however, it is one, as Mignon Nixon has argued, that is enacted not just in psychic space, but by the physical, material and social estrangement between two people talking in a room (Nixon, 2005). Like in the car they do not touch, they do not change places, they do not come together. It is this very frame, as Laplanche argues (1999), that allows 'unbinding' to occur.

Felicity Colman writes,

Affect is the change, or variation, when bodies collide, or come into contact. As a body, affect is the knowable product of an encounter, specific in its ethical and lived dimensions, and yet it is also as infinite as the experience of a sunset, transformation, ghost. In its largest sense, affect is part of the Deleuzian project of trying-to-understand, and comprehend, and express all of the incredible, wonderful, tragic, painful and destructive configurations of things and bodies as temporally mediated continuous events. (Colman, 2005: 11)

Affect here is understood as the residue of an encounter, the part of the encounter that becomes 'knowable', that marks the encounter *as* an encounter, as an event that is both specific and yet simultaneously infinite. Strapped into their seats these asymmetrical 'bodies' wait together, bearing each other's presence, colliding occasionally through the words they exchange across in the aural cavity of the car. Through this collision, affect signals that the encounter has occurred – mother and child know something has happened between them because there is a reverberation, a variation, a change within this aural cavity beyond what is actually said, a variation that is both situated and infinite, both singular and generic. When Joel inexplicably mourned the death of the car, maybe he was telling us about the loss of this affective space, an affectivity that is 'made public' through the peculiar material conditions of car-talk. Because the car is sealed off temporarily from the world, neither a fully public nor private space, the car-talk between mother and child acts as a transitional space in

which affectivity can be sampled, and in which making things public can be initially and temporarily explored.

In her analysis of women's road narratives, Deborah Paes de Barros (2004) reminds us that most female road narratives involve children. When women go on the road, in their imaginations, at least, they take their kids. In many such narratives the road itself symbolizes the womb, functioning both as the child's birth canal, the child's transition, that is, between possibility and actuality, between the generic and the specific, and the mother's movement towards an understanding of maternity. In the car, the mother and child wait together in the suspended time-space of the journey. As in analysis, along the way some stuff gets said, stuff that gives rise to the knowable product of the encounter made up of the negotiation of delicate processes of identification and separation necessary for both mother and child to emerge as distinct, and yet with a capacity to remain somehow connected to others.

The Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami has been described as 'among the world masters of automotive cinema. He understands the automobile as a place of reflection, observation and, above all, talk' (Scott, 2003). The entirety of his 2002 film, *Ten*, was filmed in a moving car in which Kiarostami was not present. Having briefed his 'actors' he placed two tiny fixed digital video-cameras on the dashboard, positioned to capture in close-up just the face of the driver, and the face of the other passenger, as they drive in plotless circularity around the streets of Tehran over a period of a few days. The driver is a female divorcee, played by Mania Akbari, and the film consists of 10 episodes, each one featuring a short driver-passenger scene, edited down from 23 hours of footage. The first, last and middle scenes are of the protagonist and her seven-year-old son. The central thematics of the film are female subjectivity, gender, desire, freedom, and forms of female communality. These themes, as is often the case, are elaborated in relation to maternal ethics – the tension, that is, between female and maternal subjectivities, and the ways a child functions as an embodied, or at least audible reminder that the question of freedom and the feminine is always posed in precarious relation to this affective tie. Mania Akbari, the actress, is herself a divorcee and Amin, the boy, is her own son. Given that there was no director present, and Amin was led to believe that the actual filming was a series of screen tests, the performing has a raw, real-life, home-movie quality to it.

What emerges in the opening scene is a nexus of tensions played out through the necessary and yet contested asymmetry between mother and child. Amin gets into the back seat of the car. During the scene we only see his face, but can hear both him and his mother. In this sense, the 'subject' of the scene is their car-talk, the dialogue itself. They argue hysterically, hurtfully, and painfully, more like a couple rowing, than a mother and son. She appears to urgently want to convince him that the divorce has been a good thing, at least for her, and that he

must see her point of view – her life with Amin's father was suffocating her. Now she has left, she can at least breathe, even if she has bought herself this freedom through falsely accusing his father of being an abusive drug-user. It becomes clear that this is a conversation they have had many times before. The child does not want to hear her point of view, will not condone her actions or forgive her, takes the side of his father. He behaves in a mannered sense like a 'little man', but he also constantly draws attention to the fact that he is a child, revealing the ways she uses him as a container for her own anxieties, and that she needs his consent both for her own narcissistic reasons, and to alleviate her guilt. He blocks his ears, begs her to be quiet, only to get drawn back into the dialogue when she provokes him. He is rude and abusive to her, and eventually he angrily gets out of the car.

At the centre of their dialogue is a dispute about the extent to which one person should be bound to another. They shout:

Mania: I'll tell you something. No one belongs to anyone, not even you; you're my child but you're not mine. You belong to this world ...

Amin: Sure ...

Mania: ... We try to live here ...

Amin: ... That's right ... but you don't let me speak! I'm only a child. I can't belong to myself. I have to grow up to attain an age that will allow me to belong to myself.

Mania: What's your problem today? You have to be mine?

Mania wants to both have the child, and for the child to belong to the world; for him to not need to just belong to her. She needs him to be both specific and generic simultaneously. If he belonged to her then it would imply a reciprocal demand in which she would be bound to him, and she would no longer belong or have access to the world. But the child knows that he needs to be specific for longer – that he can only belong to himself, choose himself, once he has had an experience of being chosen by another. In the asymmetry of the car, in their fixed positions that constitute the time-space of their analytic encounter, their unbinding occurs around the question of ethics: the ambivalent reality of already being given over to one another during the elongated period of waiting we call childhood. Here in the drawn-out time of the long car-journey, but also in the stuck time of the traffic-jam and the dead time of the parked car, car-talk makes explicit the parallel waiting of childhood and maternal time. While the child needs time to separate, to belong to both himself and the world, what the mother in *Ten* makes public is that the ethics of maternal work entails the arduous and at times impossible practice of waiting for this to happen. The car could then be best thought of as a kind of waiting room, built at the same moment as the emergence of psychoanalysis, as a space within

which to wait for childhood and maternal time to evolve. This process I am describing as being chosen out of the generic, into the specific, in order, at some point, to be given back to the world is simultaneously constitutive of maternal time.

desperate days

When my kids were little, I planned to write a book called 'Desperate Days'. It would be a book to help people like me. I was living at the time in a tiny third-floor one-bedroomed flat with my two children. On weekends, by 10am, which was already 4 hours into our waking day, it had become too cramped to stay indoors. So we would go out into the city. I would take a pram, and the ubiquitous bags of 'stuff' essential for maternal work, and we would venture out; to cafés with wobbly wooden tables that would judder alarmingly as I and the children and those bags pushed by, and again on the way back, still with all the stuff, but now with a child balanced on one arm and a hot-chocolate TO SHARE on the other. Or we would move across some desolate open 'public space' which repudiated inhabitation, a square or green patch that perhaps looked appealing on a map, but which was only ever designed to be traversed, forbidding all forms of inhabitation, and on to an ART GALLERY, or MUSEUM, of all places, in some vague attempt, perhaps, to retain a gossamer-like connection with another life, a life of sophistication and intensity and intellectual pursuits that I imagined that I once had before these desperate days set in, but really because these places were warm and large and above all anonymous, and legitimate places to pass time with small children. The ART always eluded me; my time in art galleries was spent changing nappies in corridors, or literally sitting on the floor of the gallery space itself unpacking one or other of those bags to find an elusive Miffy, or cherished rag, or searching for an odd, forbidden room in which to eat an illicit picnic as I didn't have cash for any more CAFÉ LUNCHESES, or being literally pulled along by children who wanted merely to pass through the galleries, for whom the pleasure was simply to move from one space to the next space, or chasing kids up and down the aesthetically pleasing concrete slope of Tate Modern, knowing that somewhere else, somewhere on another floor, behind another door was ART, but that right now we were playing the chasing game again, or rolling small plastic cars down that slope and that either the game would drag on for hours, or it would very soon run out of mileage, or the security guard would move us on, and we would be on the move again; perhaps to stare at the boats in the freezing wind, or down onto the Thames 'beach' for euphemistically named 'beach combing', meaning watching the children picking up pieces of broken glass and rusty sharp objects and torn wet plastic bags or hitting each other with drift wood, or holding them with straddled legs and bare bums over the water so they could wee.

My unwritten book, *Desperate Days*, was going to be designed to help mothers create a cartography of the city from a maternal perspective, identifying crucial stopping off points in a day like this that were invisible to the naked eye – places where the tables did not wobble so much, where there was a short secluded stretch of corridor for that smelly nappy change, a place to rest where a pram could be propped up by a useful ledge to prevent it tipping over, a crucially located corner shop that sold those all important cardboard-like biscuit-substitutes known as ‘rice cakes’. At first glance the city presents itself as an unyielding series of non-places for those who use its spaces to perform maternal work: to feed and change, to manage affective states on a moment-to-moment basis, to keep these strange creatures we call children ‘on-the-boil’ with just the right level of stimulation and comfort, to ‘wait’ productively while childhood unfolds. These *are* the non-places of solitude, and speak of the profound isolation that many women performing maternal work in the city feel, despite being ‘in public’. And yet, maternal work in these non-places also entails a very particular management of the experience of publicness. In the art gallery, the children can not touch the exhibits and want, incessantly, to know why. In cafés they can not shout and scream until their food arrives, and must manage their hunger, or at least their desire, in ways that do not impinge on the strangers around them. On the bus, they can not stand on the seats without enduring the consternation of other passengers, either levelled directly at them, or at their mother. In one sense these are merely shifting issues of social mores. But at another, they reveal the edge of what we think of as permissible ‘in public’. They are the point that the child as non-(or not-yet) citizen is called on to behave as if it were a citizen, and in doing so, creates ‘the public’. And mothers are the conductors through which this ‘calling’ passes.

A friend recently recounted her difficulties after adopting a child with knowing how to mother in public. In the street, gallery, supermarket, car-park – in all those exposed places where we now live much of our lives, she had to learn painfully and quickly what to do. Having made the transition from non-mother to mother literally overnight, and being a mother of an already grown and articulate child, she had to work out immediately what was acceptable in terms of levels of noise, degrees of hygiene, limits of behaviour, and the modes of maternal discourses that express and constitute the varied and contradictory values, norms, prejudices, desires and hatreds which can and can not be made public. In Augé’s classic non-place – the airport – there is always a child who unhooks the canvas strap that separates waiting passengers while they line up to have their hand-luggage, shoes, belts and liquids checked in these paranoid times. There is a bizarre shocked silence when it happens, as if the child stands in for the latent imaginary terrorist who is missing from the actual airport scene. At this point, everyone looks round for a figure of authority to intervene, to repair the breach in the boundary between citizen and non-citizen, to re-make the

relation between the public and its publics – the silent publics-as-audiences – who watch on while this restoration takes place.

Interest in the public – be that public space, the public as audience or witness, the public sphere, or public opinion – moves from John Dewey's discussions of the state and its public in *The Public and Its Problems* in which the public arises as a demand by 'a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name' (Dewey, 1954: 35), through to a much more ambivalent contemporary notion of the public in which it no longer pursues politics but private interests (Hannay, 2005). No longer a 'distinctive grouping' as Dewey would have it, the public is now almost the opposite: 'an assemblage of unintegrated publics-as-audiences, so that society is split into established executive authority on the one side and interested spectators on the other' (Hannay, 2005: 32). Simon Bayly (2009) traces the ambivalence around notions of the public through a strand of writing that recommences, after Dewey's famous work, with Jean Luc-Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* and Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*, both of which display a profound suspicion of the collective, the community, or any other notions of the public that seek to displace the primacy of the self-emancipated individual subject. In these works, to think the public as such, let alone to make the public happen, is to always appeal to a totalizing gesture that annihilates the fundamental equality and heterogeneity of an axiomatically indefinable social formation.

Perhaps the most recent name for this indefinable social formation has been 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004). In Hobbes' original articulation, the multitude is opposed to 'the people' or 'citizenry'. However, in Hardt and Negri's work, the Hobbesian disavowal of multitude is inverted, and takes on an almost prophetic status as the name of an ever-emergent collective social subject that is unmediated, revolutionary, immanent and affirmative, refusing any form of historically established organization.

It is tempting here to name the child as a paradigmatic instance of 'multitude', and to read the anecdotal moment when a child unhooks a barrier strap at an airport as one in which the child makes visible, through their ability to relentlessly enact the heterogeneous, spontaneous and indefinable, to keep on unhooking that barrier, some aspect of the way we repress multitude in public space. However, my interest here is in the mother, and how she is called on, not only to make a citizen of the child, but to do so publicly – to voice on behalf of everyone, nice and loud, just why we have a barrier, and why it must be maintained.

massing mothers

Why did I never notice mothers before I became one? I noticed children, I'm sure of it, though perhaps less often than I like to think I did, but I had no sense of

their mothers as people with contours and edges, with tastes and desires, with lives, with jobs, with relationships, with worries; no sense of mothers as individuals at all. And yet once I became one, I began to notice mothers everywhere I went. They were on the bus with me, my doppelgangers, as I tried to negotiate that tight right-angle that is set aside for luggage, wheelchairs and prams, and which works fine except when there is already luggage, wheelchairs and prams occupying it; they shadowed me in those same cafés where they struggled away at the adjacent tables with children who wanted everything now, and when it finally arrived, nothing seemed to satisfy; they followed me down supermarket aisles to the check-out where toddlers tantrumed wildly about wanting to stay seated in the trolley when it was time to get out; they cropped up in the car-park as I juggled whether to leave the now sleeping baby unattended and locked in the car while I wheeled the trolley across the tarmac to reclaim my pound, or whether to risk waking the baby by taking it with, or just forget the pound and abandon the trolley right where it was. I began to realise that mothers were with me everywhere I went, and that 'we were everywhere', mothering in strange, loose, unacknowledged, shadowy groups, like members of a sect who knew about each other's presence, but couldn't openly greet each other; and that we watched each other surreptitiously as we mothered in public, learning from one another, silently criticizing one another, and occasionally signalling to one another via small enigmatic gestures of solidarity.

Although mothers are deeply implicated in this shoring up of the boundaries of the public, mothers also make desire paths through the city in relation to their maternal tasks, transforming it as they go, changing its fabric through the work they do, and grouping or 'massing' themselves, at times occupying the place of multitude. Drawing on De Certeau's (1984: 117) notion of 'space as a practical place' Nicholas Crane describes desire paths as

the imprints of 'foot anarchists', individuals who had trodden their own routes into the landscape, regardless of the intentions of government, planners and engineers. A desire path could be a short cut through waste ground, across the corner of a civic garden or down an embankment. They were expressions of free will, 'paths with a passion', an alternative to the strictures of railings, fences and walls that turned individuals into powerless apathetic automatons. On desire paths you could break out, explore, feel your way across the landscape. (Crane, 1999)

Although mothers do talk of experiences of mothering in isolation, if we look a little closer still, we begin to encounter other mothers in the material landscapes I am denoting as 'maternal non-place'. When mothers 'mass', when they trammel their way across the urban landscape, they create multiple and complex desire paths as they go. For the slope of the Turbine Hall is literally teeming with parents and small children, just as some cafés find themselves, one day, simply overrun, perhaps due to some strange configuration in which the doors are just the right size for getting all the stuff through, the tables just solid enough not

to budge as you push past, the food just edible and affordable enough, the location just well-enough suspended between other vital locations – playground, bus-stop, park.

The appearance of collectivities of motherhood take many different forms, at times overtly political, as in the case of *Mothers of the Disappeared*, the Argentinian group of mothers and grandmothers who gathered visibly and extraordinarily bravely in public during the 'dirty war' with signs around their necks bearing the names of their children, framed by the question 'Donde Esta?' (Elshtain, 1994). Through the process of naming their specific and irreplaceable losses these mothers forged a group political identity on the basis of their shared experience (a form of identity politics) but it was their material massing in public spaces as generic 'mothers' (each disappeared child was specific but the mothers belonged to a generic group of 'mothers of the disappeared') that provided the dialectical tension between common cause and specific loss, that gave their protests such emotional and political weight. *Mothers against Silence, Women in Black* and numerous other peace movements in Israel–Palestine have offered similar examples. While it is the identification with their commonality (their identities as mothers who have lost children, or mothers who speak out against militarism) that constitutes their group identity, it is their capacity to occupy public space in the generic – to mass as mothers, if you like, to become multitude, that makes a political deformation of public space. Just as climate change protesters will enter a site in the particular, as individuals, and then when it comes to the moment of their direct action they may all suddenly take off their top layer to reveal they are wearing a Santa costume underneath, so the generic (we are all Santas) is what is established not as identity but as multitude.

There is an uncomfortable juxtaposition, perhaps, between these overt forms of political massing characterized by *Mothers of the Disappeared*, and the amorphous gatherings of mothers I am describing, as they go about their mundane work, making desire paths across urban cityscapes, dealing with tantrums and balancing their stuff as they go. In *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno (2004) argues that real 'public space' is now the reconfigured space-time of labour which no longer conforms to clear divisions between work time and 'free' or leisure that characterized the Fordist era. In such reconfigured public space, we all become 'virtuosos', however much we fail in our performances, as work becomes more and more a vehicle for the production of communication. Mothers in public space make a precise contribution to the creation of performances and audiences that is central to the link between the virtuosic and the ethico-political. What we perform when we nurture, contain, reprimand, feed, change, amuse, entertain and teach in public, what we make visible is that which spills out of these experiences; the uncontained aspects of human subjectivity in its affective dimension, the ways we are always already too much for each other; too much emotion, too much relationality, too much hot

chocolate, too much stuff. Though we are bad virtuosos, and all our performances inevitably fail, virtuosity itself is nevertheless staged: each mother herself emerges from the generic through her attempt at the virtuosic performance of motherhood, to make public this excess, which itself is the product of the ways individuality and particularity persist in the context of the generic. What mothers make public is perhaps the politics of affective encounter after all – the affective work that is required to live alongside one another in co-operative ways.

Once my second child grabbed the legs of the next-door mother on the bus and passionately cried out 'mummy!'. There was an odd embarrassed pause. 'Wrong mummy' she said, a little tersely, as if to be mistaken in one's specificity gave the lie to the whole enterprise – that the connections between mother and child are at some level quite arbitrary, established through patterns of habit and little else. But occasionally, when a child chooses me out of all the other mothers, when the child I call 'mine' says 'mummy' and I realize that this means me, then by stepping forward, by moving in this moment from the generic to the specific, to being the chosen mother of this specific child, I am publicly called on to occupy the borderline, the anomalous, that constitutes the pack.

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