

Online Life Writing and the Production of Maternal Knowledge

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When I first discovered mommy blogs, it was the year 2011 and I was pregnant. I had two questions on my mind: what am I supposed to do now and how do I fit mothering into my life? Previously, I had been looking for answers in books: Sylvia Plath and Patti Smith were my mother idols because they were creatives. Yet, the way they wrote about mothering was far-removed from my reality. In her journals from the 1950s Plath expressed reservations about the compatibility of being a poet and a mother (Plath). Still, upon having children, she tried to conform to the mommy ideal of her time. None of it ended well for Sylvia. In the case of Patti Smith's life writing, she doesn't share much about mothering, instead, she makes it clear that she separated caring for small children from a life of making and performing music (Smith, *Just Kids*; Smith, *M Train*). Nowadays Smith often shares the stage with her adult children. While in literature a discussion about mothering was still sparse in the 20th century, I realized that in the early 21st century it was proliferating online. I turned to mommy blogs.

The blogs I discovered offered glimpses into the everyday lives of contemporary mothers in the US. Their posts promised proximity between experience and narration. Bloggers offered practical tips, inspiring stories, described epic failures and fostered a sense of not being alone. Instead of looking back removed from the moment of something happening, mothers blogged in the middle of whatever was taking place. At first, New York mothers and those who were creative writers or professional artists appeared interesting to me. I had for as long as I can remember, been on my way to becoming a New Yorker, so it felt crucial to read about how someone felt during a home birth

on Lower Manhattan. In my pregnancy dream, I would become a New-York-mother in Helsinki – this entailed combining my new role as a mother to working as a songwriter and an aspiring researcher.

By reading blogs, I shared the early months of motherhood with complete strangers across the ocean who had never heard of me and never would. In Finland other mothers might keep up appearances when we met in cafes, and it was easy to imagine that silence meant no one else found anything difficult about becoming a mother. On mommy blogs I read narratives of mothering that ruptured the ideals or were simply very different from mine. As much as there were staged narratives to be found, there were also non-conforming, norm-critical, failing, and chaotic stories of mothering. The narratives were not stable and predictable because an ideal fairytale mommy blog might one day turn into a narrative about grief when its author met an unexpected life event. Navigating in the web of blogs according to my interest and reading along alleviated an acute sense of loneliness which accompanied me as a new mother.

In 2014 I began reading blogs as a researcher. I was interested in the ways mothering practices were changing because of residing and life writing online. The assemblage of computer and mother appeared to be producing a kind of mother – or the kind of mothering – that did not exist before. At the same time, I became a cancer patient and another perspective opened in front of me into the precarity of life. At first, illness experience appeared incompatible with the ideals of intensive mothering. Intensive mothering privileges continued presence, maternal sacrifice of time and energy and the ability to exert control in a child's life (see for example

Ennis; O'Reilly). Over the years of this research and simultaneous illness, it grew into a critical stance: being ill offered a point of entry into researching mothering, and I found that many who engaged in life writing online, were writing from a fruitful position of uncertainty.

MOTHERING AND WRITING IN THE CONTEXT OF FEMINIST AND QUEER THEORY

The main field of my dissertation is gender studies. This means that my approach is constructed from and contributes to the feminist knowledge project which holds a dual citizenship in the realms of academia and activism. I contribute to motherhood studies, inspecting mothering as a digital-material phenomenon. Motherhood has posed a troubling set of questions in feminist and queer thinking over time. Described crudely, motherhood has been identified in two ways: as a problem arising from procreation and biological gender that binds "women" to homes, low salaries, and the heterosexual patriarchal arrangement of families at large, which affords women with least power. The other feminist definition of mothers has idealized motherhood and mothering as special gender-related qualities or definitive characteristics of women.

Like the term *woman* itself, which remains best used with acknowledgement of instability of any given definition, mother is saturated by crossing interests and definitions which rarely allow the complexity of the term to flower. Mothering both as a concept and practice ruptures neat definitions of gender and thus motherhood or mothering has often exposed rifts between theories, ideals and societal or cultural lived experiences.

Instead of idealizing mothers, I question the taken-for-granted connection between gender binaries and mothers, expanding the horizon of mothering as ethical care.

In addition to motherhood studies, I draw from feminist philosophers of science who make systemic synthesis of large scale, discipline-expanding combinations of areas of study, concepts, and social politics. These theories have

not been extensively applied in motherhood studies. I refer to Donna Haraway and her work in knowledge production, relationality of humans, animals, and machines (Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*; Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective"; Haraway, "It Matters What Stories Tell Stories; It Matters Whose Stories Tell Stories"; Haraway, "Tentacular Thinking"). I embrace Karen Barad whose theory of agential realism is a challenging offering to reconceptualize relationality, subjectivity, and materiality (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*; Barad, "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings"). In my work I combine their concepts with feminist life writing theory. Aurora Levins Morales' environmental activism and storytelling ethics also inform and inspire my research (Morales; Morales and Morales). These theorists are committed to outlining a feminist ethics. The ethical dimension, an aspiration toward inclusion and care runs through their theoretical contributions even though they arrive there from different disciplines.

Haraway and Morales underline the role of storytelling from perspectives of ancient peoples, dead people, the marginalized, silenced and the possible. Barad arrives at feminist ethics from quantum field theory and its application to subjectivity and relationality. Contributing to this feminist ethics of care is the through line in my own research. It extends to an aspiration to leave the world a little better after my research and my actions in mothering, while acknowledging that neither job can be completed.

I study the subject matter of digital life writing by mothers as a question appearing in three overlapping fields: 1) mothering, which I approach with motherhood studies 2) life writing, which I work with by focusing on life writing studies and 3) digitality, which I approach via media studies methods. I follow these three strands and look for methods that help locate areas of overlap. I agree with Marinne Liljestöm who has written in the pages of this journal that taking into consideration the history of gender studies, it should never fully

conform as in its core there is the intention of changing the world (Liljeström 43–45). My guiding interest is not to collect harmonizing theories and disregard others but to investigate breaking points and tensions that so-called theoretical or methodological “incompatibilities” expose and which have to do with the historicizing of feminisms as Liljeström has noted (Liljeström). Therefore, in addition to motherhood studies, life writing studies and social media studies, I borrow instruments from new materialist thought, queer studies of death, and narrative studies, as well as illness studies.

CONSTRUCTING A METHOD OF READING MATERNAL ONLINE LIFE WRITING

In my reading I focus on maternal life writing by the blog authors and not for example comments that posts receive. I do this even though I agree with researchers who underline the significance of the online context in which digital life writing unfolds, and which constitutes the community and platform and the ways that these digital systems both coax and facilitate behavior online (Morrison; Paasonen; Poletti). I make this cut on research material because blog archives are so vast and because my primary research question regards the life writing of the mother-authors. Still, the idea that digitality has its own materiality becomes crucial in my analysis of maternal life writing and the quality that changes mothering.

My main method of analysis is feminist close reading. Close reading originated in literary studies but in feminist use it expands from the analysis of text or image to considering the relevant contexts and their meaning giving and formative role. My process can be described by the four stages that Aimee Morrison has outlined for studying online life writing: 1) exploring and engaging, 2) categorizing the material 3) selecting material, 4) interpreting (Morrison 44–46). In the four research articles I also engage close reading practices such as diffractive reading which stems from Karen Barad (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 71–91) and reparative reading by Eve Sedgwick (Sedgwick 124–146). These are methods of close reading with a particular concept in mind.

In addition to this, my approach is defined by a playfulness which invites creativity into academic research practices and results in my coming up with new concepts as well as using poetry and metaphoric language to arrive in an “elsewhere”, a possible opening for new thought. This can be named as an involvement in critical autoethnography as a method. Critical autoethnography leans on the idea of situated knowledge, emphasizing the perspective and experience of the researcher as a valuable insight in the process of study (Holman Jones). This means that although I do not examine my artistic works produced during the writing of this dissertation, my published memoir and music have become processes in which I have continued to explore the same themes as in my academic research (Swan, *Viimeinen kirjani: kirjoituksia elämästä*; Swan, *From the Bed and Beyond*; Swan, *D/Other*). It also means that instead of a liability, I consider my experiences as an ill mother to contribute to my analysis of such life writing. From this position I produce what Rosi Braidotti names cartographies of situatedness and power (Braidotti). The role of experience in knowledge production of m/others is central to this dissertation. It is also key to those feminist and queer theories that underline fluidity and precarity of identities and experiences.

M/OTHERS, D/OTHERS & ETHICS OF CARE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

My dissertation finds online life writing to be a facet of contemporary mothering in the west. Blogging is not just a passive or monstrous medium where experiences of mothering are uploaded for anyone to see, or to be attached to commercial interests. Instead, what I call *maternal online life writing* is part of the process of coming to knowledge about mothering in the early decades of the 21st century.

Mothering is an intersection. Viewed from the perspective of those who mother, it yields knowledge about embodied materiality, border-crossings such as birth and death, and the digital, or the social and cultural aspects of gender and inter-generational care. Mothering intersects with digital conventions of telling narratives of experience. In my analysis I found that in maternal online life

writing ethics of care are negotiated against and along societal norms. Digitality facilitates the conditions for maternal life writing and changes the practices of mothering. Maternal online life writing is woven into the development of the digital as a sphere of life narrative and what we now call social media. Blogs have impacted how lives are narrated online. They make space for actualizing digital-material mothering in ways that center the needs and desires of those who mother. For example, digital life writing becomes a maternal strategy of survival, as narrating adverse experiences repairs the now – the illness time – as I show in article IV of my dissertation (Joutseno, “Blogging to Let Go: Life Writing, Maternal Cancer and Illness”).

A major challenge in this research process was pinpointing the construction of the in-between-ness I identified in the way mothers reside on and offline. I needed to articulate unfolding transformation rather than fixed boundaries because I found that mothering was constructed in a material-digital loop. This discovery led me to identify something that had previously remained unnamed. I came up with the concept of D/other (see Joutseno, “Becoming D/Other: Life As A Transmuting Device”). D/other embodies the flow between digital materiality and analogue materiality. The concept addresses the transmutability of m/other into d/other. D refers among other possible meanings to digital, death, and daughter. This conceptual creation became a method of reading the movement between material and digital as transformational in the politics of mothering.

My hope is that D/other could also be useful for detangling mothering from women, heterosexuality, binary gender, able-bodied-ness, and whiteness as ideals. Maybe, D/other can counter the demand for m/others to stay alive or the definition of what having a life means. Crucially, like m/other, d/other encompasses *the other*.

With my work I wish to acknowledge those who came before me and those who currently work in feminist thinking and on mothering as well as those who work toward a feminist future in other modes. I have been enchanted into thinking with others. Instead of locking something into place, I hope that my dissertation becomes an invitation, not to my ideas necessarily but to daring to participate, even if hesitantly and imperfectly. *It is a joy for me to be able to take part, if only for a short moment in time*. My dissertation proposes that mothering is an epistemic node, and this knowing is communal, experiential, and self-critical. Maternal online life writing becomes a networked encyclopedia filled with entries as questions and hesitations, celebrations, and critique.

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