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Mothering and migration: interdisciplinary dialogues, European perspectives and international contexts Introduction



With the advent of wider global and historical transformations, ordinary lives are becoming increasingly mobile and transnational, while identities are reconfigured and roles such as mothering are continuously negotiated and reconstituted. Such intersecting conceptualizations of migration, motherhood/mothering¹ and belonging/exile are at the centre of the thematic insights unfolding in the articles included in this Special Issue entitled “Mothering and Migration: Interdisciplinary Dialogues, European Perspectives and International Contexts”. Three of the five articles and the Afterword originate in a workshop organized by the *Motherhood in Post-1968 European Literature Network*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which brought together researchers from across Europe and across disciplines with the aim of inserting literature into an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural debate. The workshop, “Motherhood, Migration and Exile”, held on 26 April 2013 at the University of London, was coordinated by two of the editors, Gill Rye and Adalgisa Giorgio, while the third editor, Anastasia Christou, participated as an invited discussant.² The workshop stimulated much discussion in an intellectually absorbing environment of dialogue and debate. With this Special Issue we seek now to push the boundaries of those discussions further, exploring the nodes of convergence and divergence in the histories, geographies and sociabilities that shape migrant mothering and motherhood. In this Introduction we highlight some of those intriguing points of empirical and theoretical insight offered by the articles, but, first, we situate their case studies within the debates that are currently the focus of the existing and still limited literature on migrant mothering.

Undoubtedly it is the coupling of migration and mothering that stimulates interest in understanding the challenges, constraints, opportunities and creativities that migrant mothers are engaged in, as both mobility and parenting pose intensified inequalities and obstacles. Migration is a phenomenon which coalesces around borders and boundaries, incorporation and belonging, and exclusion and exile. Mobile lives can be both empowering and disempowering. While they offer opportunities for new beginnings and better

livelihoods, they are increasingly the focus of polarization and extensive exclusion within wider societal debates of alienation in “landscapes of fear”, as recent immigration and election debates in the UK have shown (Hall, 2015). Mothers, too, are vilified, stigmatized, racialized and, to a lesser extent, praised, recognized and rewarded for their contributions to parenting and societies. While the debates on motherhood that shift away from normative frameworks involve discussions on a diverse range of themes and subjects, from lone, divorced, single or teenage mothers, to mothers from black, gay and minoritized groups, those who have disabilities, are working class or impoverished, the politics of blame revolve around the lack of nurturing or not enough nurturing in the provision of emotional, developmental and educational outcomes that are perceived as correct (Duncan, Edwards, & Alexander, 2010).

Forms of alternative or “non-normative” mothering practised by those mothers whose circumstances differ from the “norm” are said to be “mothering on the margins” (Craig & O'Dell, 2011) and include transnational mothers (Phoenix, 2011), mothers in “global care chains” (Lutz, 2008; Parreñas, 2001), asylum-seeking and refugee mothers (Smyth & Whyte, 2005). Not only the circumstances and the contexts, be those economic, social or geographical, but above all the relationality of motherhood and mothering as concept and practice make it clear that it is contingent upon the very situations mothers find themselves in. Mothering is a flexible and transformative concept (Millman, 2013) and as such it should be conceptualized within the particularities of the social and cultural geographies that surround it and the connected histories, representations and sociologies that shape its processes along the way.

Additionally, the financial volatility and the unprecedented economic and social crises that have emerged under regimes of austerity, and the hegemony of cuts in a neo-liberal model of citizenship eroding long-established welfare institutions, have further exacerbated the challenges of social reproduction for migrant mothers. Further vulnerabilities highlight new layers of racializations which act to “dissuade ‘undesirable’ migrants from having children”, as they are “unable to produce ‘good’

neo-liberal citizens", and to question whether they are "responsible" as migrant mothers to parent without government assistance (Loneragan, 2015). Thus, additional layers and regimes of governmentality and control of migrant bodies emerge as gendered and radicalized discourses of the nation (Christou, 2015a), preserving acceptable citizens able to sustain the neo-liberal paradigm through controlling and shaping social reproduction in order to solidify its institutional longevity.

While the role and place of reproduction remains under-theorized in studies of migrant mothering processes, scholars have suggested that an expanded concept of reproduction, inclusive of reproducing culture, heritage and belonging, in addition to childbirth and motherhood, can articulate more complex stories that challenge the very notions of mobility and stasis (Gedalof, 2009). Drawing on such intricate and intimate layers of reproductive repertoires enables us to speak to the wider context in which mothering/motherhood practices unfold as well as to shape societal narratives of the varying roles of migrant mothers (Baldassar & Gabaccia, 2011; Erel, 2011).

Yet, it is the very spatial configurations that render representations of migrant motherhood/mothering as "m/others" who are "outsiders" to the nation-state, often in the guise of a "racial state" (Lentin, 2004) that compartmentalizes them as undesirable reproductive bodies. Thus as "despicable diasporics" (Christou, 2015b), migrant mothers epitomize ontologies of disgust in the majority's explosive agony over dropping fertility rates of the national collective and increasing ones for the excessively reproducing ethnicized minorities within. As researchers, we are urged to make migrant "m/others" experiences visible by re-problematizing their representation "to position the migrant-woman-stranger within a gendered critique of the racial state" (Lentin, 2004: 304). It is important here to articulate the utility of an intersectional approach in migration studies, capable of framing the underpinnings of "racism" theoretically and of accounting analytically "for the diverse racial, class and gendered experiences in international migration" (Grosfoguel, Oso, & Christou, 2014: 10). Such an intersectional approach can challenge "representations of immigrant mothers as outsiders to the nation, who use services without having contributed to them", allowing us "to articulate the multiple, complex and intersecting ways structures of power reproduce social divisions in the everyday lives of these migrant mothers" (Erel & Reynolds, 2014: 108). It is this connectivity with the diversity of parenting experiences and social histories of migrant mothers that offers interpretive opportunities to understand the entanglements of power, identity and ideology as intersecting processes of inequality (Erel, 2013; Reynolds, 2013).

Both motherhood and migration have a life transformative potential and this is clearly manifested in the destabilizing and conflictual impact that transnational mothering has for gender and family relations in particular contexts (Parreñas, 2010). Such transnational care can have immense emotional and practical implications as the impact of parental migration and the resulting reconfiguration of care arrangements on the subjective well-being of migrants' children has been highlighted in various studies (Baldassar & Merla, 2013; Graham et al., 2012; Phoenix & Seu, 2013; Ryan, 2007; Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2009; Svašek, 2008; Yeoh, Huang, & Lam, 2005). At the

same time, migrant motherhood/mothering can bring about a personal journey in the development of strategies of survival, resilience and empowerment that can become a pathway to claiming an affirmative and agentic stance in social reproduction activities. Migrant mothers can also potentially become models of positive change within a racialized neo-liberal context, in contributing, through their mothering practices, values, inclusive immersion in community and social life and a sense of belonging and citizenship that in turn can be emulated by the next generations. Research that charts the experiences and perceptions embedded in and shaped through the "cultural politics of reproduction" (Unnithan-Kumar & Khanna, 2015) can unravel the social transformations at the centre of the dynamic relationship between mobility and mothering/motherhood, both agentic and socially transformative.

We did not aim to provide, in this Introduction, exhaustive discussions of the themes and debates that we have just outlined. Nor was it our intention to do so in the articles collected in this Special Issue. Yet the articles are underpinned by these themes and debates and engage with them more or less overtly while they explore and make a distinctive contribution in their specific subject-matters. All six contributions are committed, however, to offering, through an interdisciplinary and international lens, a view of the multidimensional and complex patterns and processes of migrant motherhood and mothering and to draw further attention to migrant women and social reproduction in time, space, social and literary contexts.

The individual articles tackle the temporalities, spatialities and sociabilities in which migrant mothering/motherhood is played out and where maternal practices intersect with local and global histories, ideologies, structures, power and inequalities. They include a variety of settings with differing social and cultural geographies, ethnic groups, languages, discourses and practices, which are examined through a range of research methodologies: from discourse and textual analysis to ethnographic and qualitative approaches contextualized within a mixture of theoretical frameworks.

Adalgisa Giorgio opens her article, "The Italian family, motherhood and Italianness in New Zealand: The case of the Italian community of Wellington", with some considerations on the role of migrant mothers in creating connections between sending and receiving societies, to then explore how the Italian ideals of family and motherhood have been translated in the context of New Zealand social and civic life. With the ethnographic precision of the community of Island Bay in Wellington as a case study, she examines self-perceptions and performances of Italianness, women's work and gender roles, the upbringing of sons and daughters and intergenerational relationships. These themes are set against the ideals, ideologies, practices and policies regarding gender, work and family current in Italy and New Zealand, in order to assess how the community has departed from the Italian models, the influence of the host country and the impact of these factors on their sense of Italianness. The analysis gives great depth of insight into how motherhood and mothering practices are both nodes of convergence with and divergence from ethnic group practices, tradition, homeland and ancestral origin cultural politics. Giorgio's article brings clarity and focus to how values and moral norms are translated in the context of migrant mothering, "home and host" lands.

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