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Maternal Environments

This article explores the creation of 'maternal environments' in my work alongside my infants in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia as a practice conducive to socially engaged performance towards peacemaking. Sara Ruddick defines peacemaking as 'a way of living in which it is possible to learn and to practice nonviolent resistance and strategies of reconciliation. This description of peacemaking is a description of mothering' (Ruddick 1990: 244). I use the term maternal environments to conceptualise the kind of human relationships and social systems that are forged through mothering as a 'socially constructed set of activities and relationships involved in nurturing and caring for people' (Forcey, 1994: 357). My own experiences of mothering while working as a lead consultant and applied performance facilitator with my infants and partner, James Forrester, for the Youth Theatre for Peace (YTP) project in Kyrgyzstan for the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) in addition to training workshops for the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Foundation Tolerance International (FTI) between 2010 and 2016 are used as case studies to explore maternal environments. This article will process these deeply personal accounts of working alongside my infants to advocate for positive role-balance, institutional structural support, health-promoting lifestyles and family-friendly policies and programmes.

My health and wellbeing is based on balancing my multiple-roles of being an academic, researcher, practitioner, partner and mother alongside other roles. The opportunity to work alongside my two infants at various points between 2010 and 2014 as the lead facilitator and consultant of the YTP project in Kyrgyzstan increased my sense of health and wellbeing, as I was able to actively explore and question prevalent assumptions about motherhood (both my own and those of others) while balancing between the previously noted multiple-roles. Michele Vancour notes that 'little research has been conducted on the health behavior

and work experiences of mothers in the academy' and suggests that future research should 'examine academic mothers' strategies for balancing motherhood, work, and health-promoting behaviors' and consider variables of support in developing strategies to balance work and family roles (Vancour 2009: 152-64). This article is an attempt to contribute to this under researched area to explore strategies of work and life balance through maternal environments. I use the conflated term maternal environments to link the contexts within which women, men and communities 'mother', building human relations and social systems through embodied, social and cultural practices produced through mothering. I connect the term maternal to environment as defined by Yrjö Sepänmaa's to include 'our culture with its sub-areas, even our intellectual atmosphere: science, art, and religion, as well as work and play, human relations and social systems' (my emphasis, Sepänmaa 1986: 15-6). Louise Lamphere, Patricia Zavella, and Felipe Gonzales use the term 'social location' to 'specify the way in which regional and local political economy interact with class, ethnicity, culture, and sexual preference to condition the strategies and meanings that working mothers fashion through their agency' (Lamphere, Zavella, and Gonzales 1993: 4). The issue of agency is often connected to human relations and social systems. These human relations and social systems, when strained or broken through conflict, require varied mechanisms to reconstruct and interweave relations. I make the argument that mothering and artistic practices can assist with this process when individuals and communities might be at their most vulnerable. Reconstructive practices post-conflict can provide an opportunity to establish common bonds and to realign values and common goals towards peacemaking.

Ruddick uses the term mothering regardless of whether the individual providing care is male or female stating:

...a mother is a person who takes on responsibility for children's lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life. I mean 'her or his'. Although most mothers have

been and are women, mothering is potentially work for men and women...Although maternal work can, in principal, be performed by an responsible adult, throughout the world women not only have borne but have also disproportionately cared for children. (Ruddick 1990: 40-41)

The term maternal environments could be extended to parental environments. However, Ruddick notes that the use of the term parenting versus mothering 'denies the history, and usually the current practice of female mothering, including women's unjustly disproportionate responsibilities for childcare' (Ruddick 2016: 216). The emphasis on maternal environments is important to highlight obstacles for gender equality and career progression; that as a society we need to think more creatively and constructively about childrearing.

I will explore the concepts of mothering and maternal environments through my own personal experiences working alongside my daughters on two projects and a sustainability workshop based on using Drama for Conflict Transformation (DCT) in Kyrgyzstan.[{note 1}] In order to balance between my multiple-roles of being an academic, researcher, practitioner, partner and mother alongside other roles, there are moments when these roles change, overlap or develop into alternative roles due to their reimagining into a new kind of maternal subjectivity. This is a constantly evolving practice and discourse, as these roles are often performed differently based on their social locations. Thus, there is a negotiation between one's own maternal subjectivity, social locations and reception that often evolves into new forms of social relations.

While in academia from 2007 to present, I observed that mothers and infants were almost completely absent from academic environments that might include conferences, meetings and classrooms. I wondered if mothers were intentionally absent from these social locations or if they'd been excluded. When I became a mother in 2010, I gave birth during a sabbatical. I completed my sabbatical and maternity leave while finalising editorial corrections whenever my infant napped on my breast pillow. I remember this time as being both intellectually and

emotionally stimulating. I took long walks, played in the park, attended play groups and continued to attend academic conferences and delivered several talks with my first infant. Following the birth of my second infant, I delivered a keynote at Stockholm University in Sweden (June 2016) and the University of Columbia in the USA (February 2017). I prefaced my talk at Columbia University to note: 'You may have noticed that my infant is here with me. I hope you don't mind that at times I might need to breast feed, to crawl on the floor and to babble with my infant. Any objections?' No one objected. The inclusion of my infant into formal academic settings created an informal and relational space that often produced affective and empathic results.

The act of bringing an infant into formal spaces created an alternative form of practice for the Youth Theatre for Peace (YTP) project as well. Ruddick defines practice as 'human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims... People more or less consciously create a practice as they simultaneously pursue certain goals and make sense of their pursuit' (Ruddick 1990: 13-14). The primary aim of the YTP project was to use performance as a vehicle to explore the dialogic possibilities of cultural forms towards peacemaking between formerly aggrieved parties; particularly in relation to the violent clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in June 2010 when in the city of Osh, located in southern Kyrgyzstan, 470 people, mostly Uzbeks, were killed, 300,000 were forced to leave their homes and 110,000 fled over the border.

Kyrgyzstan is surrounded by the mountainous borders of China to the east, Uzbekistan to the west, Kazakhstan to the north and Tajikistan to the south. Ethnic and social tension exists between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks and between Kyrgyz and Tajiks in southern Kyrgyzstan. One of the reasons for this is primarily due to the former carving out of borders during the Soviet period, so that there were no distinct boundaries between countries, which has led to ongoing conflict on issues such as land rights and water. There is a tendency for these conflicts to escalate, especially in the southern part of the Fergana Valley. However, this

tension does not usually take such a violent form as, for example, in June 2010. The outbreak of ethnic violence, primarily between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, spread across Kyrgyzstan into northern Kyrgyzstan and the capital Bishkek. The noted violence in June 2010 following the overthrow of former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev reflected growing strains among identity groups in the country, weakening rule of law and corruption under the Bakiyev regime. The YTP project was implemented by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) in early 2010 (Breed 2015).

The aims of this project, then, changed from being preventative to address the mounting tensions between ethnic groups to working within violent contexts. Alongside the overall goal of creating dialogic spaces forged through the YTP trainings, youth camps and drama clubs and theatre tours, an additional personal aim in this project included the exploration of how I could create a maternal environment through artistic practices and the mothering of my infants. I wanted to explore how some of these multiple goals and aims might overlap and compliment one another; particularly in relation to the role of mothering and peacemaking. In terms of mothering in relation to peace, Ruddick states:

As a collective, the group draws strength from the act and symbol of birth and from the passionate labor of women who, throughout most of history, have assumed the responsibilities of protection and care...As men become mothers and mothers invent public resistances to violence, mothering and peacemaking become a single, womanly-manly work – a feminist, maternal politics of peace.
(244)

The necessity for maternal environments to address and redress issues of conflict opens up the question of how and why socially engaged performance might enable a conducive space to achieve this goal. In an interview with Nurgul Djanaeva who founded the Forum of Women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan in 1994, she notes that women worked towards reconciliation efforts following the June 2010 events in Osh stating: '...women's issues were left out by the majority of actors

both during and after the conflict, and by those with a focus on women's issues -- their focus was limited to only sexual violence. ... Women were creative and courageous in their work, not only in documenting but also in our work on peace building' (Merrill 2011: 168). As previously noted, the YTP project was originally framed as a preventative measure to address the increased risk of ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan, but was implemented following the violent events of June 2010. Participants were selected from Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Russian backgrounds and gender was balanced between female and male youth serving participants and teenagers (15-16) from rural conflict-prone areas. The YTP project addressed the noted lack of focus on women's issues through the overt inclusion of women as trainers and articulation of issues related to women and girls that included, but were not limited to, the themes of bride kidnapping, racketeering, suicide, gender inequality in the classroom and workplace, migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia and forced labour. To bring attention explicitly to maternal environments notably brings to the fore gender equality issues concerning the ability of women to work and contribute to civil society whilst mothering and the role of mothering linked to peacebuilding, as women are often excluded during this temporal and liminal period of time.

Women are disproportionately eliminated from the workplace and civic society due to issues related to traditional roles in Kyrgyzstan where women are the primary carers for children and the elderly whose lives are often effected by poverty and the inability to afford childcare. The number of day-care centres fell by 75 percent from 1990 to 1994, only 27 percent of women with pre-school children make use of day-care centres and 45 percent cannot afford them (Lazreg 2000: 51). The role of women and mothers within the civic sphere needs further research and analysis, to explore alternative approaches to the inclusion of mothering to promote access and empowerment for women and girls.

Youth Theatre for Peace

The maternal environment that was created in Kyrgyzstan by working alongside my then five-month to seven-month old infant in 2011 and six-month old infant in 2016 was established within a particular social location that intersected between varied regional, cultural, political and economic factors across the seven regions or oblasts of Kyrgyzstan (Batken, Bishkek, Chui, Issyk-Kul, Jalal-Abad, Naryn, and Osh) and transnationally to my location in London and the head office in Washington, DC.

When I conceived my first infant in February 2010, I was aware that there might be implications concerning whether or not I would be allowed to continue my fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan. However, the project coordinator of IREX noted that within the cultural context of Kyrgyzstan, working alongside my infant would foster greater trust, respect and partnership. In order to integrate my infant into my facilitation and working practices, I had to come up with creative solutions to a new set of pragmatic and logistical considerations based on how I would continue to breast feed, how I would deliver the sessions and how I would handle any interruptions or otherwise. These considerations were addressed by primarily using a sling to carry my infant and to breastfeed and by integrating fellow trainers into the delivery of the sessions. Core to establishing maternal environments was the creation of team versus individualist styles of facilitation.

Facilitation requires the facilitator and / or facilitation team to enable an environment where participants are able to share ideas, to ask questions and to take risks. The facilitator supports a group process to reach common objectives, to sometimes challenge thinking, to provide multiple perspectives from within the group and to construct a strong and supportive structure for the group process. A facilitator helps to keep a group on task, to keep track of time and to provide a physically and emotionally enriching space to work. The structure for facilitation within the YTP project was based on a team of facilitators who co-facilitated exercises, often including the roles of a main facilitator, support facilitator and ring-leader. The main facilitator was primarily responsible for setting the main

goals and objectives of the exercises, providing instructions, ensuring that individuals understood individual and group tasks, monitoring the progression of the exercise and culminating the learning of the session with reflective questions. The support facilitator was primarily responsible for demonstrating examples, providing additional instructions to break out groups or serving as an additional group member when necessary and supporting the main facilitator with any additional needs. The ring-leader kept an eye on the overall organisation of the session, serving as time-keeper and assisting with any individual needs of participants (for instance, accompanying any individuals who may need to go in and out of sessions) and providing support with handing out materials and the organisation of the workshop space. Due to these multiple roles, the teams worked as a single unit, able to switch between the three roles as necessary. In consideration of co-facilitation as a factor of maternal environments, I would note the importance of establishing a cohesive facilitation team that provides equal representation between male and female facilitators, languages and ethnicity, when possible. In this way, the facilitation team serves as an example of teamwork and peacemaking. The focus on team facilitation enables facilitators to go in and out of the role of main facilitator when necessary – for example if an infant or child requires urgent attention – or allows for the support facilitator or ring-leader to address any issues concerning the overall delivery of the session.

My focus on working alongside my infants and partner illustrates the desire for role balance between my multiple roles as an academic, researcher, practitioner, partner and mother. There are cultural variances regarding how, when and where mothering is made visible in relation to working environments. The norms in many societies (as noted with the YTP locations including my base of London) are for mothers to be in positions of caring that often omit them from varied spaces or situations that are not considered child-friendly (like conferences, meetings or classrooms). The collective and collaborative facilitation techniques employed in the YTP are influenced by Rudick's feminist standpoint that takes on 'an engaged vision of the world opposed and superior to dominant ways of

thinking' (Ruddick 1990: 129). A feminist standpoint questions the very notion of maternal exclusion from the workplace to challenge overt power relations based on individualistic versus collective and paternalistic versus maternalistic value structures that dominate in most work related environments around the world. Rudick states:

Firstly, caretakers work with subjects; they give birth to and tend self-generating, autonomously willing lives. A defining task of their work is to maintain mutually helpful connections with another person -- or animal -- whose separateness they create and respect. Hence they are continuously involved with issues of connection, separation, development, change, and the limits of control.
(Ruddick 1990, 131)

What would happen if the paternalistic structures would alter to maternalistic structures? How might the working relations, systems of communication and forms of communication alter? In the YTP project, I note that working relations altered into collective versus individualist modes of delivery. Communication took on a more informal and personal approach, effective for post-conflict reconstruction as new identities and communities are forged. The arts provided a space for songs, dances and stories to be overtly used as a way of sharing traditions related to place (often highly contentious when discussed in less abstract ways) towards problem solving conflict related issues.

In September 2016 I designed and facilitated a two-day workshop in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan with my ongoing collaborators from UNICEF and FTI alongside my second infant who was then six months old, to enhance the impact of the 2010 IREX and FTI and 2014 UNICEF and FTI projects with sixteen trainers whom I initially trained in either workshop. During the 2016 training, my infant fell ill, but the trainers and partner organisations provided support through both their mothering of my infant and their ability to fall into the role of the lead facilitator.

Since colleagues from partner organization FTI had worked alongside myself as curriculum developers and co-facilitators and had integrated the methodology into their own organizational practices, they were able to switch in and out of exercises with ease in terms of providing side-coaching to deepen the knowledge and understanding of main aims and learning outcomes for exercises, to demonstrate examples and to apply exercises to the context of Kyrgyz culture and society. During various points when I served as the main facilitator, FTI colleagues often took my infant into their arms for a cuddle while I gave directions. The weight of responsibility, both in terms of mothering and imparting knowledge, felt like it was equally divided between us within the newly created maternal environment and with those particular individuals. Jessica Benjamin notes the necessity for 'reciprocity, recognition and intersubjectivity' and coins the term 'intersubjective space' concerning the ability to 'identify with the other's position without losing one's own' (Benjamin quoted in Baraitser 2009: 29-30). Benjamin highlights the importance of establishing an ethical relationship between self and other stating:

Speech no longer figures as the activity of a subject empowered to speak, but as a possibility given by the relationship with a recognizing other. Because communicative speech establishes a space of dialogue potentially outside the mental control of either or both participants, it is a site of mediation, the 'third term'. In the dialogic structure, identification can evolve. Mediated by symbolic expression, identification can become not a collapse of differentiation, but a basis for understanding the position of the other. (Benjamin 1998: 28)

The notion of the dialogic and recognition and reciprocity in relation to intersubjectivity is emphasised as a possibility through the relationship with the recognizing other, or by the listener and witness. In this way, the emphasis of voicing is displaced to the emphasis on listening made possible through

recognition. This argument is particularly relevant in relation to the work of the YTP project using performance as a dialogic tool for peacemaking.

I would suggest that the maternal environment that was initiated with my first infant in 2010 served the purpose of the workshop to establish recognition and reciprocity that helped to engender communicative speech throughout the project. During my trip to Kyrgyzstan in September 2016, the Director of partner organization Foundation Tolerance International (FTI) showed me a picture of herself holding my first infant in her arms. She had kept that picture on her desk for the past six years, a position usually honoured by one's own direct family. It is this kind of bond that can be established through mothering that can serve as a cross-cultural, transnational and interdisciplinary network to establish maternal environments. Six years later, she held my second infant in her arms and took a similar picture.

Towards working maternal environments

Arts-based projects that incorporate mothering towards the formation of maternal environments might develop more inclusive practices towards a more tolerant society. Maternal environments are fostered in inclusive settings that establish values of power sharing between individuals and mixed groups (potentially between varied ethnicities, religions, ages and languages). Mothering within the YTP project has influenced my own facilitation practice to be more inclusive of the 'open structure' that infants and children often evoke 'whose acts are irregular, unpredictable, often mysterious' (Ruddick 1980: 352). The minute an infant or child enters a workspace, that space changes entirely.

The social relations, then, establish the space of maternal environments. An infant automatically evokes a quality of care, as infants are innately vulnerable and require the basic requirements of care established through being fed, protected from the elements and loved. Often, the first couple of characteristics are true for most working environments, but the focus on love is not innately integrated into working environments. Maternal environments,

however, integrate care in relationship to love and kindness. Examples include physical contact between the infant and those who hold the infant. There is a proximity of holding that requires affection and trust. Youth and adult participants of the YTP project would often hold my infants. During this time, they would share anecdotes of their own birthing or childrearing experiences accompanied by nursery or folk songs that they would sing. Artistic practices and mothering provided a maternal environment where individuals could relate to one another in nuanced ways. Children and infants provide the opportunity to play and often evoke laughter and smiles. The lightening of mood, particularly in conflict and post-conflict settings, enables a more receptive and relaxed space to engage with one another. During one particular trip, when my infant could not come with me, youth and adults corresponded with her through a giant card with well wishes, pictures and symbols. I would argue that my infants were active participants in the peacemaking process. Not merely due to their presence, but because they were agents in an artistic maternal environment. The infants provided common ground for individuals to communicate their own experiences and practices of childrearing through song, stories, movement and play while offering advice alongside sharing moments of hardship or challenges. In this way, the infants created an affective space that nurtured a sense of care and support that extended from the family home into the external maternal environment.

There is an underlying exclusion of women, children and mothers within the workplace, particularly during the first couple of years of infancy. This particular span of time is often spent as maternity leave away from the working environment. However, how might working environments be more inclusive of mothers who want to work alongside their children? How might children potentially alter working environments to establish more empathic and caring spaces that contribute towards peacemaking?

The act of bringing a child into the workplace shifts not only our ability to work and how we work, but whom we work with as well. In the case of the YTP project,

this relationship was characterized by mothering, both women and men from the community taking the role as mother to nurture my infants and the wider youth cohort as facilitation was shared across the facilitation team. The practice of mothering became an embodied experience that instilled values based on care and kindness into the practices that we were extolled through the YTP project.

What can we apply from the concept of maternal environments to promote health and wellbeing in the academy more broadly? Institutions can support the practice of mothering as an intrinsic process of building inclusive projects and societies. The lead institution of the YTP project, IREX, noted that mothering would be an asset for the project as a method for intercultural and interdisciplinary engagement between participants from differing cultural, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds. Mothering as a practice was so effective, that my second infant was invited into follow-on projects with other partnering organisations including UNICEF and FTI. In this way, demonstrating the ongoing relational ties and sustainable structures that enable an infant to be incorporated into the workplace. Key factors that contributed to effective maternal environments within the YTP project included: a) consideration of the practical, religious and dietary needs of the group; b) shared planning and delivery of sessions; c) flexibility of facilitation style and delivery; d) shared mothering practices and integration of storytelling related to mothering; and e) considerations of mothering and maternal environments as networks that can be used for systems of change.

I argue for the inclusion of mothering into socially engaged performance practices to allow for more tolerant and inclusive societies. I have provided an example of how mothering in the YTP project established a common bond between participants, nurtured co-facilitation practices and created generative and compassionate maternal environments. Baraitser states:

What happens to us when, not only do we live in close proximity to this irregular, unpredictable and mysterious other, but we are

somehow responsible for them too? What kind of subjectivity emerges? And what might happen to our understanding of the subjectivity if we took this subjectivity as if it were the norm? Although I would want to resist replacing one norm with another, the exercise would be a deliberate imaginative engagement with what it is like to live alongside this other life form, as if it were normal! (Baraitser 2009: 10)

I would change the statement to read: 'What happens to us when, not only do we live in close proximity to this irregular, unpredictable and mysterious other, but we work alongside them too?' The kind of subjectivity encountered when working alongside an infant can be the intersubjective space of maternal environments as argued earlier in the article. The imaginative engagement of this being the norm would bring into consideration a range of opportunities that allows for balancing motherhood, work, and health-promoting behaviours. Here, it is worth quoting Tajyka Shabdanova from partner organization Foundation Tolerance International (FTI), regarding the experience of female Kyrgyz trainers working within a maternal environment (A Breed 2017, personal communication, 19 June 2017):

For Kyrgyz women, the facilitation of the camp with the infant was unexpected behaviour...because it is often thought in Kyrgyzstan that if a woman has an infant, she is weaker...I would like to share a story of our teacher Jarkyn Kubaibergenova. Jarkyn served as a Master Trainer (following the initial YTP training) training the next recruit of YTP trainees during her pregnancy and continued to work alongside her infant after giving birth; an uncommon practice in Kyrgyzstan.

Following my return from the training in 2016, I met with the research office at my current institution, the University of East London (UEL). In an informal discussion,

I had noted the affect of working with my infant and the positive impact that children have on the working environment. Although at first one of the research officers noted his own personal stance that children should not be included in academic settings, he later noted that he had observed how a female colleague was steadily demoted after childrearing. This conversation progressed into a useful discussion about how institutions could be more supportive of academic mothers by conducting meetings through conference calls, providing a rotation of roles considering maternity leave and otherwise and bringing infants and children into the teaching and learning environment after risk assessment and authorization. Academic mothers need structural support, health-promoting lifestyles and family-friendly policies and programmes (Vancour and Sherman 2010). In this way, maternal environments might allow for the advancement of academic mothers within inclusive working environments.

In order to develop more tolerant societies we need to be more inclusive and that includes the possibility of bringing children into the workplace. Through my noted personal experiences of mothering during the YTP project, I have observed how maternal environments can promote more humane, empathic and community-based environments. In addition, it provides role-modelling and opens young people to new learning experiences. I have presented an overview of my experiences of maternal environments that nurtured a holistic approach to community engagement through the YTP project. The process of mothering is not necessarily based on the parenting of a single person or couple, but rather the network of supportive structures and alliances that creates maternal environments.

Notes:

1 See Youth Theatre for Peace Toolkit, <https://www.irex.org/resource/drama-conflict-transformation-toolkit-youth-theater-peace>, accessed 17 June 2017.

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