

**Doctoral thesis reflection:**  
**On the complexities of doctoral research and having babies**

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This is a piece written as a reflective postscript for my doctoral thesis titled ‘Mothers at large: Governing fat pregnant embodiment’. The thesis responded to a cultural moment in which the reproductive potential of fat women’s bodies was being problematised as a public health crisis with the resulting changes in maternity and fertility care and public health policy intended to manage these “unruly” bodies. Through in-depth, semi-structured *caring conversations* with 27 self-identified fat and ethnically diverse women who were trying to conceive, currently pregnant, or who had recently had a baby, this research reveals how the problem of pregnancy fatness had come to be, whose interests are served, the harmful and oppressive effects of this problematisation, and how these might be different. The thesis was written over seven years as I combined doctoral studies with the pregnancy and birth of my own two children, Bell who is now nearly six and Mae who is 19 months. The following reflection explores the complexities as well as the contributions of combining doctoral studies, especially those with a reproductive health and justice focus, with the pregnancy, birth and early parenting of my own children. The reflections are presented as a series of three creative writing vignettes concluding with a brief discussion of their significance to the research.

**Vignette One**

I am rushing to my car in the pitch dark, hoping for the glow of my just turned on cell phone to light my way, when the inevitable beeping starts. Message after worried message entering my inbox, “Hey, hope it’s going ok, remember to text me when you are on your way,” “Hey

where are you?? I'm worried," "George? What's going on?" My bladder is full to bursting, I haven't had dinner and it is now so late, I'm exhausted. I had left home nervous and excited several hours before, on an early summer evening to do my first participant interview. My partner had felt anxious about the enterprise, I was 28 weeks pregnant with our first baby and I was heading off into an unfamiliar part of the city to an unknown person's home. Climbing into the car clutching my voice recorder and folder of consent forms I said reassuringly, "Don't worry, I'll just be an hour or so." "Have dinner ready?" I had added hopefully as I pulled the door shut behind me.

I make it to my car, turn on the engine, and immediately call home, it is now after 10pm. I have been deeply immersed in an interview for over three and a half hours. Emma's story of the conception, pregnancy, and birth of her daughter has been compelling and distressing; she has been treated so badly, hostility towards her flesh infecting every shift and turn she has made through the maternity care system. She is angry, and hurt, and defiant. As I left, she thanked me! This is the first time she has told her story and she has shared it in the hope that by doing so things might be made better for other women *like her*. I rest my head on the steering wheel, a tear trickles down my face. I seem to be onto something here, but this is going to be hard. I drive home, the soft thud of my own baby stretching her limbs against the insides of my abdomen in the dark.

## **Vignette Two**

The only light in the room is the dancing glow from the log burner and a candle set up on the mantel. The air is heavy with the scent of sandalwood and lavender from the oil burner G has remembered to light and other earthy smells, blood. The first rays of dawn are starting to streak across the sky but I don't know that yet. I am outside of time. The room is hushed, I can hear movements but they blend into a gentle cadence—the hot water jug boiling in the

kitchen; the faint scratching of a ballpoint pen on paper as the student midwife writes some notes; the quiet mummer of awe between Bell, now a big sister, and her papa who are crowded around me on the couch; and the slightly wet wheeze of a newborn as her lungs meet air. This is a holy space. The normal hubbub and clutter of our lounge room transformed into a place of birth. Mae's birth.

Her arrival has been straightforward but swift and fierce. The evening before I had fallen asleep getting Bell down and woken to the dull ache of early but regular contractions around 10.30pm. My waters had broken earlier in the day, a week past my due date, so we had guessed what the night would bring. For a while G and I lie in bed, we even manage some laughs, I can't remember about what, but we're trying to keep it light. By midnight labour is in full force, I am being swallowed. Despite the offer of the comforts of the lounge I have burrowed into the smallest, darkest room in the house, the bathroom. I won't budge. Nicola arrives, a pot of soup placed on the stove, and gets to work with G setting up the birth pool. Isis has come to be with Bell, they lie together in our big bed and talk about the animal sounds mama is making. I am vaguely aware of the hum of activity, but the rise and fall of pain takes most of my attention. At the peak of a contraction I yell out, it is too much. Donna, the midwife, is here. Her calm presence wards off my fear in the pitch black of the bathroom, and with the dry warmth of her hands applying some pressure on the small of my back I push on.

Time has passed, the pain doesn't feel bearable now; I am coaxed from the bathroom with the promise of the birth pool. An internal exam at my request, "8 cms" Donna tells me "you're nearly there." G holds me as I shudder through the peak of another contraction. The pool is waiting for me in the corner of the lounge, I sink into its warm expanse, sweet relief. And then I am on my knees, the energy is shifting, I roar with the immensity of form pushing through flesh, and again, and once again. A flurry of activity, warm towels grabbed, a jug of

boiled water added to the pool, the second midwife called (too late!), one last heave and she is out, my baby Mae. It is just after 4am. I reach down into the water and lift her to my chest, her new old eyes quietly peeping up at me. I exhale deeply, smile, I think I even laugh, if I remember right we all do, my coven of support circled around the pool.

Back on the couch now, in the cluster of my family where three has become four. Mae's placenta rests in its catching bowl. A pile of towels abandoned on the floor. Rhonda, the second midwife, passes me a sip of drinking chocolate, helps me put Mae to the breast. Early morning light now escapes through a crack in the curtains and all is as it should be.



(The moments following the birth of baby Mae at home in our lounge with midwife Rhonda Jackson, big sister Bell and my partner Garrick).

### Vignette Three

It is another sunny Sunday afternoon and I am in the dark south-facing spare room of our latest rental house, the room assigned to doctoral writing, the overflowing dress-up box, an unmade single bed reserved for visitors, and some discarded puzzles, picture books, and snack remnants. I am at my desk working on “my book,” as this doctorate has come to be known by my family. “Mama is *always* working on her book” my five year old Bell has been known to complain. She also has a habit of asking “how many minutes until you finish your book mama?” I can never give her an accurate answer. I was awake almost every hour last night with the baby, she is teething her toddler molars. I have just sent our apologies for yet another weekend social engagement, the birthday party for a little person from our music classes. “It’s this PhD hanging over my head” I explain, “I have just *got* to get it finished.” Bell has just interrupted me for the umpteenth time, to tie up her doll’s hair, look at her treasure map, try her cookie dough, help find a missing shoe . . . I drift back into my sentence only to be jarred back out by an exasperated yelp from the hall, “please come and help George!” I jump up from my seat and rush out. My partner is in the hall holding the baby at a distance, covered in mud and soaking wet, the crumble of dirt in each of the corners of her mouth “she found the potting mix again” they exclaim, “and I had *just* got her dressed!”

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In *Fields of Play*, feminist sociologist Laurel Richardson (1997, p. 295) asks, “how do the specific circumstances in which we write affect what we write? How does what we write affect who we become?” This research has been an academic endeavour but also a profoundly personal one. The seven year process of writing this doctoral research has been deeply entangled in the early years of growing, birthing, and parenting my two children, and in the domestic life of our family. I continue to grapple with the ways in which “life has

imitated art” as my own journey into fat pregnancy and parenting has unfolded in the amphitheatre of this research, such that these intimate and personal experiences are now woven into the pages of this text.

Of course this is true in a very literal sense in that I have chosen to interweave photos of Mae’s birth, the experience of which I have described in Vignette Two, throughout the chapters of the thesis. In the closing paragraph to the concluding chapter of this thesis I identify how the possibilities of “finding voice” and “talking back” has been an enduring theme in this research. I have argued that this is not just in the ways in which this research has opened spaces for the voices of fat women, but also in my own journey as a qualitative health inquirer to embrace the call for fearless speech and disrupt the status quo in maternal obesity knowledges. However, as I have sought to demonstrate with these vignettes, my own task of “finding voice” and “talking back” has not just been a scholarly endeavour but also a deeply personal one as I have navigated my own journey through the oppressive terrain of fat maternity. I have included photos, as well as this brief narrative of Mae’s birth in Vignette Two, as my own voice of resistance, or “fat defiance” as Lee (2019, p. 13) describes it, to the problematisation of pregnancy fatness. Whilst acknowledging the many privileges that afforded my experience of birthing Mae,<sup>1</sup> I offer the visual and written narrative of her birth as an affirmation of the counter-knowledges of fatness, birth, and mothering explored in the thesis, and as an assertion of the ultimate transformative goal of this research.

However, my personal entanglement with this research did not begin and end with the birth of Mae. It really began, as I have captured in Vignette One, with my pregnancy with Bell in the early stages of this doctoral research whereby I found myself invested in and taxed by this research in unexpected ways brought about by my own embodied experience of pregnancy.

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<sup>1</sup> Most especially the knowledge, resources, and connections to secure the birthing support of a radical midwife, and the material circumstances that made homebirth viable (and desirable).

In Vignette Three I show how my entanglement continues as I write this postscript, fielding all of the disruptions, challenges, and competing demands of doctoral research combined with, and undertaken in the midst of, young family life. In these vignettes, I have sought to capture some of my personal entanglements with this research and the complexities they raise. I think they speak to the ways in which the specific circumstances in which I have written this research has shaped it, and in turn, how writing this research has shaped me.