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"Leave your dignity at the door": Technologies of power and the maternal body

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of

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Abstract

Women in Aotearoa New Zealand are immersed in multiple and contradictory discourses, and create meaning of their lived experiences from within them. Maternity and motherhood are life events and stages that are embedded in gendered social power relations, with the motherhood mandate positioning all women as potential mothers. A literature review highlighted how neoliberalism and biopower both enable and constrain the experience of maternity and mothering. This research aimed to tease apart some of the threads of power that produce sites of tension for women and the maternal body. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven women about their experiences of maternity and motherhood and a feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis was used to understand how gendered social power relations enable and constrain women’s experiences. The analysis showed that the neoliberal political landscape impacted on women's experiences, particularly where related to their everyday experience of maternity and mothering. The biomedical becomes the ordinary in an environment of uptake of interventions as the norm, and where a risk-adverse maternity system positions every potential risk as absolute. The expectation on women to perform ‘good motherhood’ amongst the tensions of biomedical and natural discourses also constrains them to making morally correct choices in an environment where they have limited agency. This research sought to disrupt the status quo of producing women as docile bodies within biomedical power and neoliberalism, and to empower them to continue to resist.
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Poem

A secret heaviness, the weight of an occupied womb,

Forty tiny fingers and toes.

Every cell produced entirely by me, yet separate.

The dichotomy of intense love and longing, with the guilt of discomfort and sickness.

My body feels right, as a home for these children;

All at once complete and satisfied, yet awkward and afraid.

My womb is separate to me, no longer mine;

As my foetuses turn somersaults and caress each other through a thin veil of membrane.

They are mine, yet they belong to them,

The doctors, with their cloudy spectacles of deficit and disease.

I am to blame if something happens to my children while I protect my own body,

From scalpels and needles that are poised, ready for my weak moment.

I am no longer human, I am a growing room, a machine of incubation.

I am a child, I am blind, deaf, and mute.

A naughty child, refusing to place my signature on their paper,

A vessel of risk, a vagina and a uterus, a difficult patient.

Not a woman. Not a mother. Not a person.