'BEING THERE':
MOTHERING AND ABSENCE/PRESENCE IN THE FIELD

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about families and their influence on relationships and research in fieldwork, yet seldom has the absence of family in the field received analytical attention. The authors of this paper contribute to an emerging 'anthropology of absence' in a number of ways: We direct the focus of absence away from our participants to reflect on our own children's absences in the field; we attend to the absence of individual persons whereas work in this field predominantly focuses on material objects and ethnic groups; we argue that the embodied traces felt in our children's absence make mother-child relationships unique to other unaccompanied fieldwork experiences; we illustrate the relational and contingent character of absence as absence/presence as we examine the agency of our children's absence on the process and product of our field research; and we reflect on how our children's absence/presence in the field alters our subjectivities as mother-researchers.

Keywords: absence; absence/presence; academic mothers; fieldwork; mothering

INTRODUCTION

> …all the traces of presence of those now absent are worked in such a way as to show, synchronously, the absence of presence, the presence of absence, and so in the final analysis the threshold assumes the status of an enlarged, uncannier zone of indiscernibility and dislocation, disrupting all the distinctions (Wylie 2009, 227–228).

In reflecting upon significant others in relation to their research, feminist geographers and anthropologists have provided sound critique of the colonial-era archetype, lone often male ethnographer (Flinn, Marshall and Armstrong 1998; Frohlick 2002, 49; Gottlieb 1995a). Hence, fieldwork with children is consid-

ered feasible, and a wealth of literature on the topic has acknowledged the ways in which children can shape the research process and findings (Brown and de Casanova 2009; Lareau 2000; Lunn and Moscuzza 2014). Anthropology[1] in particular has offered specific insights into the notion of mothering and field-work (Goldstein 2008; Gottlieb 1995b; Gottlieb 2008; Sutton 1998) and the children/family/ethnography nexus (Butler and Turner 1987; Cassell 1987; Flinn, Marshall and Armstrong 1998; Sutton and Fernandez 1998). The presence of children in the field can help establish the identity of the fieldworker. By just 'being there', children enable the fieldworker to occupy a role which community members can relate to (Levey 2009, 313). By providing a common standpoint of 'parent', children are useful in the building of trusting and meaningful relationships and dismantling differential power relations. Data collection accompanied by children may also raise issues not otherwise considered by the researcher (Levey 2009, 313). While considerations around the presence of family/children in the field and accompanied fieldwork in general is not new to anthropology (see Dominy 1998; McGrath 1998); the absence of a family member and how this absence impacts on the fieldworker's subjectivities, and the processes and product of fieldwork, requires ongoing analytical attention.

As Pākehā/Pākehā-raised academic mothers, the authors of this paper draw on recent work in social anthropology which explores the absence of objects and people to illustrate the agentic nature and the ambiguities of the absence/presence of our children while conducting fieldwork. We conclude that limiting ourselves to our children's physical absence in and of itself is inadequate in the analysis of the agency of their absence. Thus, in this paper, we illustrate that the following relationalities of absence are required if we are to develop a nuanced understanding of how our children's absence is made present to us, and if we are to understand how the agency of this absence influences the ways we perform the process and product of ethnographic fieldwork: the propinquity of our children's absence (including degree of physical as well as emotional/relational proximity); various hybrids as plural forms of association between human and non-human/material actors (Latour 1993); intersubjectivities (Husserl 1966) inherent in the space, nature, or context of our children's absence (including local interpretations of our children's absence/presences); as well as the agency of the space (Duff 2011; Jones and Cloke 2002) left behind where our children may have at one time been physically present.

ABSENCE/PRESENCE

Some notable recent anthropological and sociological texts written on the subject of absence include the following: Bille, Hastrup, and Sorensen's (2012) *An*

Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss; Hockey, Komaromy, Woodthorpe, and Tuey's (2010) *The Matter of Death: Space, Place and Materiality*; and Meyer's (2012) *Placing and Tracing Absence: A Material Culture of the Immaterial.* Contributors to what may come to be widely accepted as an 'anthropology of absence' (Bille, Hastrup, and Sorensen 2012) suggest that, somewhat counterintuitively, absence has a materiality and an agency which exists in spaces where sociality is performed and which augment daily practices and experiences. Those writing in this field adopt variations of the term 'absent presence'.

'Absent presence' or 'present absence' as the awareness that absence is present materially or through sensorial experience has been comprehensively examined in existential and post-structural philosophy (see Fuery 1995; Kierkegaard 1988; Leder 1990; Schopenhauer (1966 [1818]). For example, Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological enquiry of absence is expressed as 'negation' (2005). Sartre offers an example of a café scene in which 'Pierre' is expected at the café but has not turned up. When the seeker of Pierre looks around, everything symbolises not presence but the lack or negation of the presence of Pierre. In other words, an absence of Pierre's presence is seen and felt all around leading Sartre to conclude, 'It is evident that non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation' (Sartre 1958, 7).

In 1997, anthropologist Debbora Battaglia refers to 'absent presence' in her description of the absence of the stone axe blade of Trobriand elite, John Noel, at an awards ceremony. Because everyone accepts that Noel has access to the axe blade, they can only assume he has either hidden it or chosen not to present it. The absence of the blade, she says, 'moves to the fore in people's speculative thinking' (1997, 507). The axe blade's absence and the story of its absence are significant because of the *non*appearance of the axe blade at the ceremony. The absent presence of the axe blade thus makes apparent Noel's attempt to control the space, the relationships wealth produces, and wealth's agency via the non-presentation of the axe blade. The absence of the axe blade then has agency.

More recently, Kevin Hetherington (2004) draws on Callon (1986) and Latour (1993) in reference to 'absent presence' to further illustrate how things (and the absences of things) 'are implicated in how we *do* social relations' (emphasis in original, 2004, 159). Here, he explains how presences are realised in the absence of people and things:

The absent can have just as much of an effect upon relations as recognisable forms of presence can have. Social relations are performed not only around

what is there but sometimes around the presence of what is not…. Indeed, the category of absence can have a significant presence in social relations and material culture (2004, 159).

However, it is Morgan Meyer's (2012) attention to the relational ontology of absence that is closer to the aim of this paper. We have employ the term 'absence/presence' rather than 'absent presence' in an effort to emphasise the relational ontology inherent in this false dichotomy. A relational ontology of absence suggests that absence only exists through relations that give absence matter or that 'make absence matter'. Thus, absence is 'performed, textured and materialized through relations and processes' (Meyer 2012, 107). Emphasising the mutuality between absence and presence, Meyer states that absence is given meaning through *traces* to what is or was present. The performances, textures, and materials of absence provides the *traces* (the sign, residue, or vestige) from what is absent to what is present. The philosophical application of 'trace' to absence/presence can be found in Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976) and *Writing and Difference* (1978). Derrida describes trace as a relational term for a 'mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present of the lack of the origin that is the condition of thought and experience' (1976, xvii). Hence, the trace is something that alerts us to the 'presence of an absence.' Those interested in absence have cast their attention to a diverse range of potential absences – absences which are made present to us through what could be considered an equally diverse range of traces.

Like Battaglia's (1997) reference to the 'absent presence' of the axe blade, much of what has been written about absence/presence has emerged from a material cultural perspective (Bille, Hastrup, and Sorensen 2012; Fowles 2012; Hetherington 2004) while others focus on the absence and loss of members of ethnic populations, social groups, classes, or concepts (see Apple 1999; Bettie 2000; Brown 2007; Farrelly 2014; Gulson 2007; Henley 2006; Hertzfeld 2002; Simpson 2001). Conversely, we draw attention not to how our research participants experience absence of their people or objects (in other words how the absence of people or objects are made present to them); but to our own experiences, as researchers, of the differently felt absences of our children in our ethnographic fieldwork. This also includes how the absence/presences of our children are interpreted by our participants, and the impact of their responses to our children's physical absences on our subjectivities as mother-researchers. We also extend this analysis to explore more broadly our own experiences of the ambiguities found in the absences and presences of our children in the field; what this means for our subjectivities as academics and co-constructors of knowledge; and how this influences the research process and product. Thus,

while the majority of the contributors to the texts noted above focus on the analysis of the absence of material objects, the authors of this paper attend to the relational ontologies inherent in absence/presence of individual persons (our children). Like Meyer and others, we trace absence through its performance. However, because of our focus on the absence/presence of our children, we emphasise that the performance of absence is simultaneously emotionally felt. In this respect, our work is more closely aligned with Lars Frers' (2013) phenomenological analysis of absence.

Like Meyer, Frers adopts 'trace' as a way to explain the relational ontology of absence/presence and the method for identifying the 'tools, objects, representations, and spaces' by which absence is made present (Meyer 2012, 103). However, for us, as for Frers (2013), analysts of absence have either missed or marginalised two vital elements in the corporeal experience of *absence*: corporeality and emotion. As Frers states:

…the experience of absence is stronger when it refers to practices, emotions and corporal attachments that have been deeply engrained into those who experience the absence. Since materiality, embodiment and (the lack of) resistance play a crucial role in the actual experience of absences, the conceptualization of absence should reflect these qualities. It is precisely because absence is rooted in processual corporality that absence can unfold such disturbing power (2013, 1).

Michelle Rosaldo refers to emotions as 'thought-feelings' and states that '[e]motions are not things opposed to thought' as is often assumed in Western science, but '*embodied* thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that "I am involved"' (authors' emphasis 1984, 143). The notion that emotions are embodied and thus corporeally felt are central to this paper: the embodied affective attachment constituting the mother-child relationships of the contributors are the *traces* that make the absence of our children so emotionally and physically *present* to us. Similarly, Frers, recognises the 'evocative nature of traces' of absent people and things which are everywhere: 'From time to time they capture one's attention, making senses and bodies wander along unexpected paths, paths that are as wonderful as they are unsettling' (2013, 2). The phenomenology of absence exposes these corporeal-emotional traces. It '… delves into the flesh, it shows the hurt and the pain, the surprise, fear and wonder that enter the corporal field when absences are experienced' (2013, 8).

Meyer and Frers agree that absence is not a thing in itself but should be interrogated as something that exists through relations that give absence matter. In

other words, I don't feel the person that I miss but I feel their absence: their 'absent presence'. The relational ontology of absence/presence not only gives absence matter in the material sense (for example, the body and the ethnography), but the *processes* through which knowledge is coproduced in the ethnographic field and our social and material relationships are also modified by the absence of our children during fieldwork. This includes our relationship with ourselves as we see and feel ourselves simultaneously 'doing mothering' and 'doing research'. Thus, the agency of absence in the field is not only significant in terms of its material impact but also its influence on the rigour of the research process including the impacts of absence on social relationships and mother-researcher subjectivities.

Perhaps surprisingly, we wish to advance this argument further by suggesting that the absence of our children in the field not exclude their presence. Buchli's (2012) work is useful here as he urges us to move beyond analyses of presence and 'absent presence' to instead turn our attention to 'propinquity' in order to better address 'degrees of nearness in different registers, rather than absolute presence. .... Propinquity rather facilitates presence in terms of relation, analogy, nearness in time, or nearness of place' (2012, 186). Since propinquity implies nearness or similarity of proximity, time or relationship, it requires a new focus on what holds the absent and the present together: the relational ontology of absence/presence. The authors' autoethnographic contributions to this paper also illustrate that propinquity or 'placing absences' (Hetherington 2004). For example, *where* our children are in relation to us when we are conducting fieldwork has profound implications for social and material relations. The authors wish, too, to emphasise the mutually constitutive nature of the researcher/child/research/participants nexus. The complex and dynamic intersubjectivities found at this juncture cannot be adequately understood through a dichotomous apprehension of absence/presence. Our reflections on these absence/presences in our fieldwork provide context for the messy relational ontologies implicit in the absence/presence of the mother-fieldworker's children.

Meyer (2012, 107) asks, 'How do we follow and describe the movements, the attachments, the translations and representations through which absence becomes matter and through which absence comes to matter?' We ask, 'How is the absence/presence of our children traced through thought-feelings (embodied emotions) and what impact does this have on us, our children, the fieldwork, our relationships, and our research outputs?' Due to the ambiguous, fluid, and relational nature of absence/presence, these traces can have surprising and unexpected impacts on us and others. The traces of our absent/present

children and their agency not only influence our social and material relationships inside the space that, for the fieldworker, can be purposely defined as the 'field' but can also seep outside the field in unpredictable ways.

'Field' in this article is understood as a specific space: one that constitutes a convergence of sociality and materiality where ethnographic data is gleaned, translated, co-produced, and recorded. For the researcher, the field is a purposive space. We did not conduct anthropology at home and the field was in a different country and a different culture – a place we chose to go to. We went to the field predominantly for the purpose of research and our purpose does not directly translate to any motivation held by our children (or our partners/husbands) for their physical presence there, or indeed any motivation for the absence of their mother/wife/partner when they do not accompany her to the field. The diverse ways we experienced the absence/presence of our children in these spaces depend on a number of factors including who and how our children are cared for, local reactions to our children's absence/presences, propinquity, and social and environmental context. For example, the spaces we consider hazardous in which our children are physically absent from us may intensify the emotional traces that make so felt the presence of their absence. The physically-felt emotional attachment as *trace* to the absent person is perhaps most strongly felt in mother-child relationships.

MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

The study of mothers, motherhood, and mothering has been explored extensively by anthropologists and related disciplines from various standpoints[2] (Walks 2011, 1).

Whether idealized in symbol and story, conferred as right, privilege, or responsibility, or examined for its social, cultural, and psychological consequences, the subject of mothers and mothering elicits strong opinions, powerful emotions, and intense commitments (Barlow and Chapin 2010, 324).

Motherhood is both a biological and a cultural state. It is also an institution which is embedded in social and cultural practices. Thus, there is little 'natural' about it (Davis 2012, 1). In this respect, the act of becoming a mother is not synonymous with the term 'to mother'. Furthermore, to 'mother a child' means giving it care and nurture. This verb phrase can be extended to any woman whether or not she is related to the child by birth. Like motherhood, the act of mothering responds to varying conditions and complexities of culture and place (Barlow and Chapin 2010, 326). Feminist authors have argued that rec-

ognising the social and cultural embeddedness of motherhood and mothering is a key step in moving towards deeper and more complex understandings of these terms (Gibson-Graham 2005; Harcourt and Escobar 2002). In this paper, we privilege the autoethnographic accounts of our fieldwork in different cultural contexts. Each mother-academic has differently interacted with and responded to what we understand to be 'good mothering'. In addition, we have each spent considerable time contemplating (at times agonising about) how our fieldwork might balance, contradict, or endanger some long-held ideals of mothering as an intensive and self-less caring activity.

For some, 'the art of becoming a mother … requires an investment of altruistic care and the giving of oneself to another without the surety that the love will be returned' (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 2014, 1). Indeed some women believe 'that a good mother is someone who loves her child more than she loves anyone else, loves the child unconditionally, and loves the child for the longest time–from conception to eternity' (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 2014, 16). However, love is not always enough: 'being there' for the child is regarded as an expression of good mothering relevant to our cultural context (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey 2014, 16). Being there constitutes being physically and emotionally present, being accessible, available and responsive in times of need. Being there constitutes being present in the moment for one's child, and this idea of being there links to notions of bonding and attachment.[3]

To a varying extent, as parents, we are all subject to the pressure and the desire to be there for our children. The term 'mothering', in much English-language literature, has often explicitly referred to nurturing practices that require a mother to be there. This includes day-to-day care, breastfeeding, and 'holding' (in a literal and figurative sense) (Ruddick 1989; Walks 2011). Ruddick's philosophical work on 'maternal thinking' links mothering to nurturing practices of being there, and explores the particular concrete thinking practices that evolve from this. Nurturing and 'being there' is important to such an extent that Ruddick concedes that perhaps fathers participating in full-time nurturing practices with babies are 'mothering' too since 'fathering' a child has quite different connotations (Ruddick 1989). Yet, as has been noted, the particular behaviours, practices and engagement of mothers as they occur in everyday life, in places of work and home, vary across culture and place. Rather than essentialising mothering to particular gendered acts of nurture and care that have historically been important in our culture, we see the act of mothering as variable, complex, intersubjective, and most meaningfully interpreted as 'it occurs in its particulars' (Barlow and Chapin 2010, 331). Detailed accounts of what mothers do in order to 'nurture' or care for their children do not always

involve being there (Rogoff 2003). Indeed, in many of the cultures and places in which we conduct our fieldwork, 'being there' is not the defining characteristic of 'mothering'. In both northwest China and Zimbabwe, for example, being a mother almost always involves economic provision, and thus can mean long absences from children while earning incomes (Dombroski 2011; Mapedzahama 2009a, 2009b). The contributors to this paper all acknowledge that we are pulled to 'be there' for our children somehow. At the same time, others' responses (from our own culture outside the field and from our participants in the field) to our children's physical absence from us in our work can validate or challenge our mothering choices.

Our interest lies in the 'act of mothering', that is, what mothers actually do and how they reflect on absence/presence (Walks and McPherson 2011). While we acknowledge mothering-as-nurturing is accomplished and practiced not only by mothers (Ruddick 1989), for the purpose of this article we privilege how *we,* the author-mothers, accomplish, practice and engage with mothering. We use autoethnography to examine our practices, ideals, and goals, as we try to make sense of the felt absences of our children. At the centre of our analysis are the emotions and embodied affective responses we express, particularly in those vulnerable moments, when we have found ourselves unable to practice mothering as 'being there'. These 'evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010, see also Chang 2008) are the (auto) ethnographic data on which we draw in this paper. Making visible the ambiguities of mothering, research, and absence/presence in our own lives is a step towards understanding these ambiguities in our research.

KELLY'S STORY

Bodies – maternal ones especially – are sometimes considered messy, leaky, unbounded, and problematic (Longhurst 2001, 2008). They pose some dilemmas when they impose too obviously on one's research. Research outputs presented in clean twelve-point font, double-spaced on white paper seek to erase the traces of the researcher's body to privilege cold, hard, objective, peer-reviewed reality. For ethnographers and other qualitative researchers, the researching body is the *sine qua non* for our research methods (Balsawer 2014; Davids 2014; Geller and Stockett 2007; Mahmood 2001; Ziemke 2003), yet when writing about fieldwork, the body often remains a taken-for-granted 'absent presence' (Law 2004). Traces of our body undoubtedly thread through our research outputs but they are not pulled out nor explored in any great detail. For me, the sheer physicality and materiality of my embodied relationship with my first child resulted in more than just traces of my maternal body throughout my

research outputs: the shocking newness and surprise of this embodied connection became a key theme in my PhD dissertation and subsequent work. While the direction of my research was heavily influenced by my daughter's presence with me in the field, in order to complete the research and produce outputs, I eventually had to regularly absent myself from her, and later, her younger sister.

I began my PhD while seven months pregnant. I moved to a new country and took up a scholarship to support myself and my 'scholarship-less' husband in the Australian National University. My scholarship covered our second year in the field, so there was never any doubt that I would conduct my Xining, Qinghai Province, North-west China-based fieldwork with a baby in tow. I was not fully aware, however, of the potential for such deep embodied connection to a baby, of an embodied language of gesture and touch and milk let-down, and I was unprepared for the profound sensation of emptiness my arms would feel when I was away from that little person longer than the space between breastfeeds. Even then, I assumed it would get easier as my daughter got older. I imagined I would leave her with my capable co-parent husband and trot off to my high altitude field sites. Alternatively, I would work away in my home-study while my husband played quietly with her in another room, or did some light housework.

However, I came to discover that taking a child halfway around the world to North-west China at the age of eight months could cause a bit of extra insecurity in a normally secure and calm child. It also turned out that the age of eight months often coincides with the onset of separation anxiety, and this was particularly a problem for me, as the lactating partner in the family. Having the space to think and write at home or taking significant periods of time away from the family for formal interviews was much more difficult than I ever could have imagined. Recorded interviews from the year bear witness to constant interruptions of an increasingly articulate toddler – so much so, that I came to focus my research on other mothers and caregivers because I felt they would be more understanding about having my daughter around. On the other hand, I easily passed the time in informal observation with other mothers, grandmothers and people caring for small children outdoors in public spaces. It was through these public 'awkward engagements' (Tsing 2005) with other ways of being a mother that my eventual research topic came to fruition: an in-depth, qualitative study of Han Chinese Hui (Muslim ethnic group) and Tibetan women's experiences of birthing, breastfeeding and infant toileting that was deeply educative in a personal sense.

Bodily Traces

Looking after a baby is physical, embodied labour, relying on subtle embodied cues, informed by knowledge and beliefs but still situated primarily in the body and its movements: picking up, putting down, breastfeeding, carrying, rocking, dressing, and bathing. As someone used to earning their keep through 'the mind', the intense physicality of mothering tasks came as something of a surprise. Yet, through these physically repetitive mothering tasks, I learned to pay attention to my body and other bodies in the field, and came to recognise these as clues or signals. Having my baby with me in the field kept me fluent in the language of the body, listening to my own body for indications about my baby's needs, not just the obvious milk reflex; but acknowledging my embodied and affective responses of emptiness, joy, rage, frustration, contentment, tiredness and more. In the same way, reading my own embodied reactions to research participants became a way of taking the pulse of what was happening ethnographically. I felt shamed and embarrassed when I was scolded by grandmothers for not dressing my daughter warmly enough, or for bringing her along to North-west China rather than leaving her with my mother-in-law in my own country. I came to recognise these feelings as cross-cultural engagement and made an effort to pay attention when they arose, as a moment of cross-cultural learning about mothering responsibility. I felt physically sick and angry when in an interview I heard of a corrupt money-making venture at the local hospital which unintentionally increased infanticide. I learned to recognise and let the feeling go, much the same way I do when I feel rage or despair when my baby wakes for the fifth time in a night. Awkward and sometimes unpleasant feelings became my guide when something interesting was happening in my ethnography, and, like Tsing (2005), I paid attention to them for what I could learn about the different, often universalistic beliefs that were awkwardly engaging in those moments.

It is clear that the intense embodied relationship and the awkward and emotive presence of my baby in the field completely reshaped the fieldwork and the research topic. I felt that I physically could not ignore the connection between us, and even when she was in a different room the sound of her voice calling me impinged on my ability to write and think about anything else. How then, could I ever get this research done? How could I get notes written, reports, papers, draft chapters, interviews, transcripts, translations and more with this person totally reliant on my constant presence? Two-thirds through my fieldwork year I was ready to give up, feeling I could not go on with the research and still meet my baby's need for my attentive and embodied presence. I had a new exciting topic, and lots of relationships and ethnographic experiences to

build on, but no notes, no interviews, no 'data'. Eventually, I decided to suspend my studies and we returned to family in New Zealand until we could think of something else to do.

Organising for Absence

After six months recuperating with family, and enough time back in casual academic work to confirm that I definitely needed to complete a PhD to get anywhere, I dived back in to the PhD process from afar. I now knew I needed a second field trip, and I had a good idea of what I needed to do to succeed in it. We rented a large apartment and invited available close friends of ours to join us in Xining with their baby to help us. With four adults and two children, and my daughter nearing her third birthday and excited to be living with her 'cousin', I could finally get the short absences I needed to complete my fieldwork. We spent three months back in Xining and I gathered data in the form of recorded interviews, detailed notes, photos and further observations using the method of embodied cross-cultural awkward engagement which I had now developed further using the work of Anna Tsing (2005).

The traces of my child's absence/presence are thus evident not only in my own emotions and affective response to her absence or presence, but are also traceable in the very research materials and data collected in the field. Her voice echoes through my early recordings and yet in the later ones, I thankfully note their absence. Yet these later recordings refer to her constantly, discussing with comparisons between the way I gave birth and others did, and my own experiences breastfeeding emerge in conversation. Other mothers I interview mention her by way of comparison as they explain their own mothering practices. In addition to these more obvious traces, my experiences of birthing, breastfeeding, and infant toileting my daughter clearly filter my expectations in my prepared question guides for semi-structured interviews: the surprise is evident in my recorded voice and notes when I inevitably hear things I am not prepared for. She is not there, yet there at the same time, informing everything I knew about mothering even as I learned more about others' experiences.

Bodies, Babies and Writing

Within months of returning from my last round of fieldwork, I am pregnant with my second child. Despite working fulltime in my shared office for the nine months following, I have only completed two chapters of the thesis when she arrives. She accompanies me in the early months to conferences and seminars as I seek to stay productive during the intense early months of mothering a

new baby. Later, I am ready to write again, and for the good of our whole family unit it is important that I finish the PhD and move in to paid work. With my second daughter, I *know* I will feel the embodied connection to her as a baby, and that it will eventually lessen in intensity and need. Because it is not a surprise this time, I am better able to manage the feelings of emptiness when she is not with me, and I commute to my office for four concentrated hour sessions every day, with a breast pump and a bus-timetable as traces of her absence and ongoing need for me. Later, I move in to fulltime academic employment and a longer commute as I continue to finish the final chapters. More than once, as I tearfully use my finger to break the seal of my one-year-old's mouth around my nipple in time to catch the 7.30am train, it strikes me as ironic that I must bear her absence each day in order to write a thesis inspired by her sister's presence. Yet I do become more comfortable in my absences from my children, particularly as I spend time in my transcripts and recordings, writing up ethnographic encounters with other mothers, reflecting on trains (clutching my cooler-bag of pumped milk), and pulling together my thesis. Like my research participants in North-west China, who wondered why my mother-in-law is not caring for my baby while I concentrated on my work, I start to see that working in this way *is* a way of mothering my children.

Although much of this reflection does not make it into the final dissertation or published research, traces of my embodied connection to my daughter and later children are still evident there. In acknowledgements, in fieldwork pictures, in autoethnographic interludes that reflect on my experiences, in other writings on mothering and ethnography, I can trace the children easily, whether their glaring absence in a formal section titled 'Fieldwork Methodology' or their brash and unapologetic presence in this paper. From research direction to data collection and analysis, my embodied experience of both absence and presence has alternately shaped and guided my work.

TRISIA'S STORY

Propinquity and the Intersubjective and Relational Nature of Absence/Presence

For me, the absence of my son was most often made present as feelings of guilt. But these feelings of guilt were nearly always made manifest in relation to my partner's new role as primary caregiver in a challenging environment: what was for me, my doctoral field site. My contribution to this article is thus twofold. First, the following account of my fieldwork experiences reflect 'the propinquity of absence': while my one-year old child was present in the field, he was not always proximate and certainly not near enough to me much of

the time so that I could carry out what I considered to be my core maternal responsibility (which simply meant being physically and emotionally available to him). My contribution also illustrates the intersubjective and relational nature of absence/presence. The absence I felt (and what I predominantly interpreted as 'guilt') at my choice of lack of proximity to my son in the field was directly relational to the guilt I felt at passing my maternal responsibilities to my partner under trying circumstances.

Frohlick stated that she could neither 'bear to leave her children for an extended absence [nor] to give up her ambitious research sights/sites' (2002, 49-50). Cupples writing of her children says, 'I could not have managed without them for so long' (Cupples and Kindon 2003, 213). I shared these sentiments when embarking on my own doctoral fieldwork in 2003. I was by no stretch a 'lone ethnographer' (Rosaldo 1984) as I brought my one year old son and my husband into the field with me for almost a year. For me, the notion of the 'field' as a 'place' 'out there' to be explored by the unaccompanied researcher was extended to an intersubjective space constituted by my husband and son and the complex material and social relations we all brought to the field and the research process and product (Caplan 1993; Killick 1995 in Cupples and Kindon 2003, 212; Schrijvers 1993). I could not bring myself to leave my son at home in New Zealand with my partner, Matt, while I conducted nine months of fieldwork in Fiji, not even if we all made efforts to meet up from time to time throughout the fieldwork period. Simultaneously, I felt a weight of responsibility for the comfort, happiness, and health of my small family when we made plans to all travel to Boumā National Heritage Park, Taveuni, Fiji.

As has been acknowledged by others who have conducted fieldwork with families (Flinn, Marshall and Armstrong 1998), there were certainly a great many benefits to bringing a child into the field, and a Pasifika cultural context appears particularly ideal in that regard. However, there are advantages and disadvantages particular to bringing a family to live with research participants in any field (Cupples and Kindon 2003; Flinn, Marshall and Armstrong 1998). The benefits may include a greater opportunity to build rapport; to become subjectively saturated in the culture; and to more critically reflect on family life. However, for me, bringing my son and partner to the field meant that the research was always at risk because I refused to put my doctoral studies before my family. Looking back, I often felt physically and emotionally exhausted by the constant negotiation of family health and happiness against PhD completion (Farrelly 2009).

Jacob and I first travelled to Fiji in March 2002 when he was nine months old

to determine the viability of researching community-based development there. The one-hour journey to Lavena Village from the nearest shop in Matei was heavily pot-holed and I struggled to support Jacob's little neck as we lurched and bumped along in a taxi van with no seat belts. Despite having passed a health centre just before Korovou Village, I remember feeling anxious at the thought of taking my young family to a place where the nearest hospital was a two-hour drive to Wainekeli over a rough and often flooded dirt road. I came to discover that this was a site with the highest recorded cases of filariasis in Fiji. The island had also seen some devastating hurricanes in recent years. The road finally stopped at what appeared to be the end of a small peninsula. An adult could walk from one end of the point to the other in about ten minutes. We really were surrounded by water. Coming from New Zealand where it was illegal to own an unfenced swimming pool, I wondered how on earth I was going to prevent my child from drowning here. During this initial stay, I encountered a long list of other potential risks: kerosene lanterns left sitting on floors at night; open fires and large pots of boiling water or food at ground level; children freely playing with machetes; and toddlers supervised only by six and seven year olds on the beach and at the river's edge. Despite all of this, I was assured that child injuries were very low because the local children develop skills uniquely adapted to their environment. I hoped we could all quickly acquire the skills and knowledge to keep one another safe. After carefully calculating the risks with the benefits of the field site around the needs of my partner and son, Matt and I agreed we would all go.

We returned to Taveuni in 2003. After a bumpy flight from Suva we arrived at Matei in the afternoon and bought supplies for our host family. As Boumā National Heritage Park was a difficult one hour drive from Matei, I was anxious about how many baby supplies to purchase at this point. We had arrived with an arsenal of medical supplies so I felt confident we were covered there. I had also brought ten tins of soya milk formula for Jacob from New Zealand as he was lactose intolerant but I hadn't brought any baby food. I now started to worry that he might refuse the local food. Consequently, I stocked up on large quantities of tins and jars of baby food.

During fieldwork, my partner washed cotton nappies by hand and repeatedly hung them up to dry and took them down again throughout the course of a day when the rain came and went while caring for Jacob. Jacob was a wonderful asset in terms of enabling me to build rapport and he was a good excuse to simply sit with other women and chat. However, the burden of responsibility for my family in the field was intensified when I had to leave them in the village so that I could most effectively and efficiently carry out the work

necessary for quality ethnographic research. The trace between absence and presence, even whilst we were all in the field together, was felt most intensely as responsibility and guilt when I felt their happiness and well-being might be compromised. These feelings had a significant impact on the decisions I made regarding the research process. These decisions included the time I was away interviewing in another village, the length of interviews, the number of interviews I conducted, and events I observed or participated in and social connections I made, maintained, or strengthened. For example, I was less interested in sitting around the kava bowl late at night where I undoubtedly would have learned the most about my research question because my priority at the end of the day was to be with my family in the evenings. In the first few months, I was constantly asked to join in on evening events, but after a while people stopped asking. I am convinced this compromised some of the potentially strong relationships I could have had with some of my participants. That I constantly declined their offers were no doubt interpreted as a rejection of their efforts to include me in their social lives.

Usually there was only one bus each day in and out of the village meaning that if I needed to interview people in another village, I could be away all day, leaving Matt and Jacob to entertain themselves. Some villages had no road access and I would need to walk long distances to get there along a coastal track. This would usually take me away for the village for half a day at a time. With no work of his own to do in the village and limited local entertainment, I was very aware that the days could feel very long indeed for Matt. When I was working away from my son, particularly during long absences away from the village, I would often feel panicky, frustrated, rushed, and generally ill-at-ease until I was back in the village with them again. I would do everything I could to reduce the time away and distance between myself and my son by cutting short or even cancelling unnecessary research activities.

I felt I was constantly walking a tight rope of maintaining roles as what I considered to be a 'good wife' and 'good mother' while also trying to attain research excellence (Hendry 1992), and to build and maintain what I hoped would be lasting relationships in the field. I regularly felt a physical and emotional pull toward my not-quite-absent yet not-quite-present child and away from the research and social relationships in the field. This was particularly true when either my partner or my son were unwell or unhappy with their life in my 'field', or about the frequency and length of my time I was spending away from them.

My participants never passed any judgement about regularly leaving my son with my partner because this is normal practice in Indigenous Fijian villages.

Most of the women I knew in the field left their babies and pre-schoolers with their husbands or relatives for hours each day, usually to go fishing or to work in their *teitei* (plantation). Parental roles are often carried out by those other than the biological mother and father. It is not uncommon for children to be raised by grandparents or uncles and aunts when the biological parents are unable to provide for them, or when they leave the village to work elsewhere for long periods of time. Even when the children do live with biological parents, parental roles are distributed across the *mataqali* (subclan) or *yavusa* (clan). Jacob, too, was treated like ʻ*ai* Lavena (from Lavena) and so was often passed from village member to village member and house to house. I would become anxious if I didn't know who had him, where they were, what they were doing, or when he would be brought back to me. Consequently, I was more likely to be teased for being overprotective rather than being criticised for appearing to abandon my son. After nine months of fieldwork, I never got used to not knowing where he was. I tried hard to let go, but negative images of drowning in the surf most often pervaded my thoughts. Work was out of the question until he was safely returned to me.

ROCHELLE'S STORY

Angst and Judgment

Whether or not to take Finn or India for any of my fieldwork trips[4] always caused me angst. I felt judged in terms of my mothering style and the kind of bond that I was expected to have with them. I was surprised by various people, women in particular who, on becoming aware of my plans, commented freely that they could never do such a thing: as if to imply they must love their children more or have a stronger emotional bond with them. I recall one woman stating, 'The only time I have ever been away from my children overnight was to have the next one. They're always with me'. These conversations sustained concerns I already felt about leaving my children behind. Flinn (1998, 11) suggests these feelings of guilt are why many female ethnographers take their children with them. Indeed, Trisia's account earlier in this paper speaks to notions of guilt.

Towards the end of my PhD, I returned to the field for five weeks, leaving India, aged 14 months and Finn aged 5 years with their father who was also a student. I had initially planned to go with India when she was five months old but in delaying this trip due to finances she was now a very mobile baby. The house I had rented was unfenced, was five metres from a main road and the back door metres from the ocean. I would have to watch her every second of the

day. I knew from past experiences that by taking her, the only person's needs I would be meeting were my own. I wanted to see her smile daily and hear her laughter and I knew that people in the village would adore her with her bright blue eyes and fair hair. I also knew it would be physically hard work to bring her with me. As illustrated by Trisia's story, there are many hazards to be found in a village that a small New Zealand-raised toddler and her mother would not be accustomed to. I weighed up physical versus emotional labour, knowing also that if she remained at home where she went to childcare for part of the day, she would be happy: she would have a routine, her little friends, and she would be fine. She would be nurtured and cared for by those around her. The question I asked myself was, 'Would *I* be fine?' I rationalised to myself that I would work faster and harder, and therefore it would take me less time if she did not accompany me. If she came, I would need to stay longer. I thought of my 5 year old son and their father at home

Absences: Drawing on Materiality

Going into the field, I took small remnants of both Finn and India. I had small pictures they had drawn, printed photos, with numerous other photos saved on my laptop. My favourite was my screen saver. Finn had also given me a tiny plastic pink doll named 'sister' to take. Finn had carried 'Sister' about for a period of time between the ages of two to three years, well before his little sister India was even conceived. 'Sister' had been present during my first fieldwork period when she had been brought by Finn, to Samoa when he had come for three weeks from NZ to visit. Finn thought if I could not take India or him, by taking 'Sister' I had a part of them. What was really great, he thought, was she had been there before. Finn was empathetically responding to his own absence and that of his sister India from me, seeking to fill this space with a material object 'Sister'.

The ways in which I sought to relate to and fill the absence were many and varied. My daily activities would often wander to thoughts of my children. If the heat was unbearable, mosquitoes numerous, bus trip slow or the wait too long, I would praise myself for having had good sense to keep them at home: 'I can barely manage myself, let alone another'. If the ocean was particularly warm or clear I would think about how much they would have enjoyed playing in the shallows; how they would have loved the place where the turtles swam or how much enjoyment they would have gained from the small piglets, chickens and geckos which frequently came wandering into my house.

My house in the village became a visiting place for some children. In the be-

ginning they came to stare, peeking shyly around corners, becoming more confident and settled over time. I would ensure I had fruit, biscuits or little treats to offer them. Once when I went back to the main island, and into the capital Apia, I returned with colouring books, felt pens and sweets, bringing things for the children, no different than I would for my own.

Fieldwork was undertaken at a time when internet connections consisted mostly of dial-up, availability was sporadic, social media not really used and communication systems such as Skype and texting were in their infancy.[5] Staying connected required me to call home or send an email. I remember clearly my dismay after walking to a larger village, which took about two hours, at finding the phone disconnected. I made a couple of trips back to the capital city[6] to undertake interviews with government officials and when I was there I called home to ask about the children but their dad and I had an understanding I would not talk to the children. Not because I was not desperate to hear their voices but because I knew Finn would say 'When are you coming home? Come tonight, come home tomorrow! Why can't you?' In his mind, the proximity between him and I was less than it actually was, but it was still just as painfully experienced. I felt it selfish to leave their dad to console them, just because I wanted to fill the absence by hearing their voices for few minutes, to meet my own emotional needs.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, two simultaneous processes occurred. Firstly, I had heightened emotion with respect to Finn and India's absence which impacted my desire to be in the field and my performance as a researcher. Their absence sapped my energy, my concentration and my motivation. I struggled to fall asleep and when I woke, I was not rested. I had little desire to do another interview. I had to force myself to make small talk. I wrote less in my journal, I stopped transcribing, and I convinced myself I had reached data saturation. Then I worried about whether I really had (Stewart-Withers 2007, 114). I was restless and impatient for time to pass: time seemed to go so slow. Most of my energy was expended wishing for, and imagining, the trip home. As my desire to see my children grew stronger, I also made attempts to partially lessen the felt absence by managing material objects around me. I tried to disconnect by removing various material traces of my children. I removed their picture as my screensaver, I put their photos away, and I spoke about them less in conversations. As the level in which I missed my children grew, I tried to internalise how I felt. My outward behaviour, in that I pushed myself to keep smiling and be productive with my research was incongruent with how I felt, as the felt traces to my children became deeply painful.

This experience has taught me that fieldwork, indeed any absence from home, can only be for a period of three weeks at the most as I become unproductive after this. I have learnt to know my body, my mind and my limits, and am thankful for new means of communication such as Skype that we now have available to us. This said, the children are also older. Regardless, mothering for me is very sensory – very tactile. Mothering is being able to see, touch, feel, hear and breathe the children; it is about close corporeal proximity. While this experience or these feelings certainly do not stop me doing fieldwork, I plan and undertake fieldwork with greater awareness. In knowing my limits, I would argue this awareness and these experiences make me a better researcher. Dominy (1998), in drawing on chapters in Flinn, Marshall and Armstrong (1998) ask, 'Do families keep us more honest? Do they unmask us?' I most certainly felt more unmasked. I believe I had better insight into some of the experiences of my PhD participants by being positioned as a mother with absent children.

All of my participants were, or had, engaged in the act of mothering to biological or non-biological children. Many were single mothers having never entered a relationship, or through divorce/separation, widowhood or separation from the children's father due to migration. Many women also experienced absence from children for financial, cultural, health, or educational reasons. In being reflexive and with embodied knowledge I was more compassionate and understanding of my participants' lives. I was more open to learning, and it enabled me to really hear their stories and voices. In the process of co-constructing knowledge, my participants (most of whom were engaged in the act of mothering), were also deeply interested in knowing about my children who were absent. My discussions with my participants helped with easing some of my guilt, in that I met women who had left children so they could go overseas to fulfil academic dreams, or to gain paid work. I also met various families whose children were sent to live with wider family members in Apia or overseas for education purposes or because they could not afford to raise them. My time in Samoa enabled me to accept more than rhetorically the idea that mothering does not always have to be 'done' by the mother, and that mothering can also be done from a distance and that for many the raising of children is a collective responsibility, involving wider communities and family members. Given the growth in transnational communities and the issue of labour-migration and remittance sending, an extremely common practice in many developing countries such as Samoa, many family members including mothers are indeed located away from children (see, Parreñas 2001, 2005). Seeking to understand how my participants viewed my absent children helped me manage how I felt about my absent children. Like Trisia and Kelly, I never felt judged by my

participants for being away from my children because, like Indigenous Fijian children, children in Samoa are raised by the collective. My participants made me feel better about my physically absent children, even though I still felt their presence intensely.

At the start of fieldwork, through the use of material objects, I sought intensify the traces between myself and my physically absent children through the utilisation of material objects (such as photos and 'Sister'). However, towards the end of my fieldwork, I avoided material objects that would intensify these traces as I found them to be unbearable. As my emotions intensified over time, my performance in the field was, to some extent, compromised. However, the research product was more reflexive as a result. In fleshing out these experiences I highlight the ambiguous, fluid and relational nature of my children's absence/presence. Finally, these traces to my physically absent children informed deeply not only my positionality as mother/researcher, but as a co-constructor of knowledge and my understanding of the development experience of female-headed households in Samoa.[7]

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have drawn on our fieldwork experiences to emphasise the ambiguous, fluid, and relational nature of absence/presence. This emphasis is based on the premise that absence is most deeply felt where the traces of those who are absent are forged through emotional corporeal attachments, in this case mother-child relationships. We have experienced the presence of the absence of our children in the field as a sensual trace: a void filled and physically felt with our own emotions and imaginations (Edensor 2008). The collection of autoethnographic accounts here have illustrated how we have responded to the traces felt when our children are absent/present. Even when we have been physically unaccompanied by our children, their absence is made present by various material objects (for example, our bodies, breast pumps, phones, computers, buses) and non-material traces (for example, our emotions and how mothering is conceptualised by ourselves and others), and these have given their absence agency.

The ways in which we experienced and negotiated these agentic traces have implications for the way we negotiated our work and our role as mother-researchers, and our relationships in and out of the field. The traces of our absent/present children and their agency not only influence our social and material relationships inside what we have constructed as 'field' but may also seep outside the field and may determine what we include or chose to exclude in our

writing. Our children's absence/presence may also affect our relationships (for example, a husband looking after children at home). We may also carry traces of our children's absence with us for years after the fieldwork is complete, as may our children carry our absence with them. Some anthropologists have reported long-term anxiety in their children when they have left them to conduct fieldwork (for example Ruth and Ward Goodenough's daughter, Flinn 1998, 17) and one of us, too, attributes her child's anxiety to her absences from her child when she conducted fieldwork. Conversely, another of us, considered her child more independent and confident as a result of this absence.

These narratives have provided evidence that absence only exists through relations that give absence matter or that 'make absence matter': this includes the ways our bodies react to the absence/presence of our children whether it is a milk let-down; guilt; frustration; anxiety; or comfort in relationships with others or material objects. How our participants make us feel about the absence of our children, and our relationships with our husbands and partners who take on greater parental responsibilities in our absence, change the way the absence of our children matter to us. These relations may also alter the way we see ourselves as mother-partner-researchers and reflect on the way we 'mother'. Absence/presence is a slippery relational ontology. Sometimes the material objects or technologies that once eased the feelings of loss experienced when our children are absent in the field can, over time, make more painful the presence of their absence. One example of this is Rochelle's choice to remove her children's photo as screensaver later in the fieldwork period.

All of the contributions in this paper have illustrated that the type of space in which absence/presence is performed can influence the research. Propinquity as a property of spatial relations played a key theme in the way the absences of our children were made present. For one of us, our children were a plane trip away, while for two of us, our children were near but often physically absent: one, at times in the room next door; for another, a bus ride away to a neighbouring village or just across the village green. The way our children's absences were given meaning and agency was contingent on various intersubjectivities constituting the space where their absence is made present. For example, husbands, partners, and research participants can either ease the painful traces of our absent children or can exacerbate the need to draw our children physically nearer. Material objects can also modify propinquities and thus the intensity of the traces: for example limited transport options in the field may cause us to rush our work so that we can eliminate the unwanted distance between ourselves and our children as quickly as possible.

Another key theme that has emerged from the autoethnographic contributions to this paper is the reactions of locals to our children's absence/presence as a relationality of absence/presence. All the contributors to this paper found that their participants did not challenge their choice to leave their children with their partners (either inside or outside the field) because this was a familiar practice in the cultural context in which they conducted their fieldwork. For Rochelle particularly, the knowledge that this was not only acceptable but often essential provided some relief. Her participants' responses also helped her to reflect on her subjectivities as mother-researcher and to develop a more nuanced understanding of her research topic.

All of us had absent/present partners and fathers to our children. Our children's fathers contributed to the relational space of the field and thus to our children's agentic absence/presence on the process and product of our ethnographic labour. For example, for one of us, the health of her relationship and the negotiations around childcare responsibilities in the field and time away from her child was core to how strongly she felt the absence/presence of her child. If her husband and/or child were unhappy with her departure or if there was any sense of strain in her relationship with her partner, she would avoid conducting fieldwork away from them until things felt right again.

While much has been written about the presence of families in the field, there is clearly much to be said about the diverse and unpredictable effects of the presence/absence of family members in the field on the research process, product, our relationships, and our subjectivities as mother-researchers. Work in this area not only illuminates the subjectivities of mother-researchers when they make the choice to absent themselves temporarily from their children to conduct ethnographic work, it also deepens our appreciation of culturally diverse modes of 'mothering'.

NOTES

1   Other disciplines, for example, earth science (see Macdonald and Sullivan 2008) and development studies (see Scheyvens, Scheyvens and Nowak 2014) have also written about fieldwork and family.

2   In support of Kitzinger (1992), Walks (2011, 1) argues that much of this work, however, was undertaken by men from the vantage point of men and sought to reinforce hegemony. It has been suggested that the term motherhood makes reference to a patriarchal institution which is male defined and controlled and

thus oppressive towards women (see O'Reilly 2012, 2; Rich 1977). Whereby the term 'mothering' looks to privy female defined experiences of mothering, arguing these to be potentially empowering (O'Reilly 2012, 2). More recently, feminist anthropology have carved out and claimed a space for the studying of 'mothering' in anthropology'. This said, Walks and McPherson (2011) suggest there to still be a dearth of literature 'focused specifically on "mothering" from an anthropological gaze' (2011, ix).

3   Bonding is understood as the process of 'falling in love' with one's child after birth' (Weiss 1998). Attachment is seen to be the biological instinct in which proximity is sought and maintained by the child in relation to the familiar caregiver when perceiving a threat or discomfort, with the belief that this threat or discomfort will be removed and feelings of protection, safety and security will ensue (Ainsworth and Bowlby 1991). When one is bonded with one's child there is the desire to want to respond, to nurture, and to be available. Secure attachment is thought to allow children the confidence to explore and learn. Early patterns of attachment or experiences of care are argued to give rise to thoughts, memories, beliefs and behaviours about self and others, shaping social and emotional intelligence and relationship expectations throughout life, particularly around issues of trust and security (Ainsworth and Bowlby 1991).

4   I did three trips to Samoa to collect data. The first trip was three months, then five weeks, then two weeks.

5   I now use these methods to keep my absent children more present when I am in the field.

6   The capital city was on another island. To get from the village where I was staying to Apia took a day.

7   My PhD studied the development experience of female-headed households in Samoa. By showing that female-headed households are not always socially isolated, stigmatised, lacking in agency and the poorest of the poor, the study was able to contest many of the ways that female-headed households have been problematised in development scholarship and practice, and rendered to the position of 'other'. This study highlighted the importance of culture when attempting to frame the development experiences of female-headed households in any part of the world, and the overall importance of contesting development categories (Stewart-Withers 2007).

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