

# Motherhoods and Feminisms

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Simone Hasse Stavnsbo

Paulina Mendez

**Simone Hasse Stavnsbo** | Blue skies and frost greeted us in Amsterdam for the second instalment of LOVA's Winter School in mid-December. The participants were a wonderful mix of anthropologists and those from related backgrounds, both academics and practitioners, spanning many nationalities and field sites. And while so many elements made each attendant unique, we had gathered because of our shared interest in motherhood and feminist research. The theme of this year's Winter School being "Motherhoods and Feminisms," underlining exactly the plurality that exists in these fields.

The programme for the Winter School was a reflection of this, speaking to many aspects of motherhood research across diverse ethnographic contexts - Kathy Walker on *Okâwîmâwaskiy* and Cree ethics of care, Catrien Notermans on non-human motherhood and sacred cows in India, Amal Miri on Moroccan migrant mothers in Flanders, to mention some of the inspiring speakers across fields and themes. Other perspectives from very different methodologies and disciplines also brought new insights and discussions, such as Noëmi Willemen on the historical dimensions of discourses of mothering, which was a wonderful way to set the stage as the first speaker on our first day, and Fernando Gonzalez, who presented his research on the use of donkey milk, its consequences and commercialisation, or resistance to such.

I also want to highlight three speakers whom I found particularly inspiring and whom I found speak to my own research. Tine Davids presented her research on the politicisation of motherhood in Mexico, and how motherhood is mobilised as a means to gain political legitimacy, in Davids' research this was particularly used by right wing-oriented women. This brought us to discussions of possibility for agency and perhaps even resistance in passivity – something which mirrors my own research, where heteronormative expectations are leveraged by mothers to create personal authority.

Michiel De Proost gave a fascinating talk on social egg freezing and the relational and heteronormative antecedents of this phenomenon. De Proost, taking departure in feminist empirical bioethics, argued that social egg freezing cannot be considered inherently emancipatory because it in fact reproduces inequality, individualises reproductive responsibilities and perhaps even serves to uphold conservative ideals for relationships and family structures.

Rodante van der Waal spoke about the pregnant post-human, and her work with obstetric violence and reproductive justice, as well as her midwifery practice. I found her arguments around the double relationality of pregnancy, that is understanding pregnancy as both a relationship between human and fertility as well as between pregnant person and their community of care, to be a fruitful approach to pregnancy, applicable to how fertility appears in my current research. Van der Waal suggested *undercommoning* as a way to approach healing this relationality, allowing for plurality and self-determination. All the mentioned topics are directly helpful and applicable in my hitherto and current research, and by the end of the Winter School I felt both thoroughly invigorated and inspired.

I would be remiss not to mention my fellow participants. The easy and stimulating discussion that we have shared has been such an important part of my experience at the Winter School. Our discussions were not easy in the sense that they lacked depth, but rather because

of our common interests and mutual respect, it was easy to achieve abstract and nuanced levels of dialogue, even in those instances where we had to collectively navigate sensitive and difficult topics. I am so thankful to my fellow participants for their insightful questions and comments, and their generous spirit, which helped produced much of the creative and productive energy which characterised our gathering.

Lastly, I would like to extend special thanks to the dedicated organisers of the Winter School, Emma Emily de Wit, Irene Arends and Joke Struyf, who put in a phenomenal effort for our benefit, and of course to the LOVA community, as without it, events like this would not be possible.

**Paulina Mendez** | The LOVA Winter School on Motherhoods and Feminisms consisted of an intense four days of lectures, sharing of experiences and reflections. The diversity of scholarly disciplines and geographical expertise that were represented, reflected in the diversity of questions that were brought forward.

The first day started with an ice breaker that allowed us to form groups based on the question or topic that people placed on a piece of paper. The exercise was called “unconference.” Some of the topics were: sharing your story of giving birth, migration and motherhood, the challenges of writing, and ambivalence around motherhood. There was also an activity where some of us drew body parts in pairs to later put them together. These drawings formed a figure with too many things on her head, octopus’ arms that can and must multitask, dissimilar breasts and a belly.

These conversations and exercise allowed to create a sense of intimacy that permeated the entire duration of the Winter School. It was an academic event that in a very feminist way: allowing space for the experiences of those who were present. In this sense it was not “just another academic gathering.” This felt refreshing. The organisers

were Irene Arends, Emma Emily de Wit and Joke Struyf. They did an excellent job in creating a space that was intellectually stimulating as well as facilitating conversations amongst the attendees.

As I am writing this report, I would like to share an impression of what I found inspiring, rather than a description of everything that happened, which would not give justice to the brilliance of the engagements that took place. This would also room for other experiences, such as the previous report. Perhaps an important reflection was triggered by the need to question in which ways mothering may happen, and who can do mothering? What kind of societies do we need to support mothers and those who are mothering regardless of their gender? Noëmi Willemen shared her inspiring work on the recent history of contemporary western discourses on parental roles. She spoke about motherhood as institution, as well as the practices of mothering.

Including different perspectives on mothering and motherhoods means opening space for an ontological dialogue which welcomes indigenous theorising. During the Winter School, Kathy Walker brought forth an indigenous Cree Ethics of Care “Okâwîmâwaskiy.” This term encompasses “an expansive view of Cree mothering.” She explained how, from a perspective consistent with Cree relations, maternalism is situated within a holistic order that embraces all life and diverse bodies. Walker emphasised that “when we envision care in a wholistic way that is attentive to the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of all life, we open up alternative political and critical possibilities for being in the world.”

Amal’s Miri research who works “with or on Moroccan migrant mothers” questioned the racist assumptions around Moroccan migrant women who become mothers and are simultaneously constructed as “passive citizens” by an external gaze. She brings together subjective experiences of these women and the gender representations within policy views on marriage migration, by considering how these women

navigate these structures, policies, and institutions. An important aspect is her own background as a child of Moroccan migrants, as this highly informs her work. In my view, being an insider to this community meant that she was able to identify the complexities of the experiences.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December, one of the speakers was Cynthia Dorrestijn who shared her story of going through postpartum psychosis, unmedicated. Hereby, she relied on a network of people for care, including her husband. Cynthia walked us through her experience in an honest and powerful way. What many of the contributions had in common was that even when speaking of non-human motherhood (Catrien Notermans) or the pregnant non-human (Rodante Van de Waal), the communal aspect of care which transcends the individual shows the subversive potential of mothering and motherhoods, in plural.

There is plenty to reflect upon as a result of these four days. Hopefully, participants who are as inspired as I am, can find ways to continue having such conversations. For those who could not join this Winter School, I can only recommend that you apply to the third one in 2023.