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Facing Father Absences and Troubling Memories of Our Fathers

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Facing Father Absences and Troubling Memories of Our Fathers

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Abstract

This paper explores masculinity in light of the relationship three men had with their fathers. Three stories are offered as individual poetic inquiries, initiating discussion among the authors. By understanding the relationship with our fathers through collaborative writing, we are comprehending our own embedded masculinity in society and at the same time, we are finding new understandings of what it means to be a man. We reflect on the idea of *fathering* as something we need to think about in the process of connecting with our emotional needs.

Keywords

father-son relations, autoethnography, collaborative writing, inquiry as activism

Introduction

This paper is the result of multiple comings-together (Manning, 2009) at a panel presentation during the European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ECQI) in February 2019, Edinburgh, Scotland. Each author shared a narrative about the relationship with our respective father. The feedback from audience members was interesting. For some,

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our stories regarding our respective father were understood as *feminist* narratives, offering reflections on what it means to be a man and how the stereotype of what it means to be a man was causing damage to us and men in general. Our open-hearted writing was resonating with the audience, which we received as an invitation to keep reflecting upon our upbringing and the relationship we had with our father.

In this process, we came to understand how the presence of a father in our life varied considerably and how this difference promoted and also hindered aspects of our development. Since the conference, we have reflected upon our relationship, discussing the similarities and differences in our narratives, viewing them as constitutive elements of who we are becoming as adults. Depending on the memory, moment, or the ground we traversed in our individual journey with our father that we shared, all three of us had strong needs to distance ourselves or get closer to our father. Here, we face the multiplicity, the fragments, and the complexities of *fathering*, of what it means to be a father and, of what it means to be a man/son. Additionally, we face the need to create new ways of being—a new fathering—that could help us make sense of the lives we have lived.

Harrison (1978) warned men of the problems of performing masculinity: premature death, higher levels of drug abuse and an unwillingness to ask for medical help when it is needed. Attempts to assert a tough and dominant masculinity sustain these patterns (see Sabo & Gordon, 1995). Such patterns, however, can be modified or even eliminated, which is where the authors found commonality in their purpose/desire for continuing this discussion. The men contributing to this essay have pushed back against the attributes of masculinity that Harrison (1978) warns us about.

The socially prescribed male role, by contrast, requires men to be noncommunicative, competitive and nongiving, inexpressive, and to evaluate life success in terms of external achievements rather than personal and interpersonal fulfillment. All men are caught in a double bind. If a man fulfills the prescribed role requirements, his basic human needs go wanting; if these needs are met, he may be considered, or consider himself, unmanly. (Harrison, 1978, pp. 68–69)

As we work on our own emotional needs, we find ourselves struggling with our respective father that lives in us—his temper, his violence, his coldness (see Ronai, 1995). Our fathers are a part of our individual identity, a part of how we think about ourselves and our masculinity. Our fathers are constantly with us, even as a ghost, reminding us of their absence. We can't vomit them up or excrete them out. They have made their way into our consciousness. When we realize we are not thinking about them every day, we know we are beginning to heal. Eventually, we can reach the point at which they are filed away like papers in a filing cabinet, but they remain where we put them; we can always retrieve the file and revisit our fathers and contemplate our writings and relationships

Each of us had a father who introduced and presented us to the world. In our young minds, he was all-knowing. As we grew up, we needed to have the freedom to find our

way of understanding the world that could be different from what was presented to us. We have used the similarities and differences of our narratives to “make a space that we can project ourselves into ... where what is, was or will be might become a little slippery” (Tamas, 2017, p. 112). It is the fragmented memories and uncertain stories that we tell ourselves and others about who we are, where we came from and how we came to be the persons we are now (Rath, 2012, adapted from p. 442) that the *stuff* of our projections are made of.

One thread that we found common in our storying of our fathers is *silence*. It is the silences that “provide the flesh and bone—the backdrop against which meaning is established” (Denzin, 1997, p. 38). What do these flesh and bones say about our relationship with our fathers? What have the silences created? The feeling that, at times, our decisions were not supported, our taste was not appreciated, and our identity was not recognized. We shaped our identity around a man—our father—but at some point, it stopped making sense. So we needed to find our own paths and make our own decisions.

We see our individual fathers as someone that is/was not aware of who we were and who we are now; they were neither aware of our singularity as children nor as adults. We felt unseen. Just as a tree meets the problem of the large rock underneath it by growing roots around it, so too have our lives grown around the large immovable rock that represents our respective fathers (Davies, 2020, adapted from p. 2).

Pease (2000) believes it is important to dis-identify with abusive fathers. Is it in our individual best interest to stop blaming our fathers for their shortcomings so that we can move beyond the anger and deal with the hurt that their abuse and/or absence caused (see Farmer, 1991). Detoxifying the image of father means recognizing that our respective fathers have been wounded as well. Maybe our fathers were distant because they learned to be that way from their fathers. Maybe their fathers didn’t talk to them either? About his own father, Auster (1982, p. 20) writes, “He never talked about himself, never seemed to know there was anything he *could* talk about. It was as though his inner life eluded even him.” I think our fathers knew how difficult growing up could be, but since they managed, perhaps they thought we would manage to grow up without too much intervention also. With distancing comes silence and silence can have negative effects. We felt an absence from their silence, signifying for us, an inability to meet not only their own emotional needs, but ours as well.

This beautiful act of writing gives us an avenue to be able to express our sadness, pain, and/or anger. We need to be able to express our sadness/pain/anger in order to be able to see, reflect, and engage the intensity of the rejection felt from him, showing our fathers how they have damaged us. Such expressions also show how much we have needed this work—of looking into ourselves—to meet and to nurture our emotional needs.

Method

After presenting our conference papers at ECQI in February 2019, we were paid a beautiful compliment during the question and answer session: “I regularly find myself in panels/sessions on ‘feminism’ and I have not been in a session as ‘feminist’ as this in years! Thanks.” This prompted us to think about ways of bringing our writing together to create a single body of writing. Instead of bringing our writings together to tell, once and for all, what our fathers’ fathering might mean, thinking with Gale (2018) we began exploring what work this body of writing can “do” in the world. This encouraged us to think more about showing how viewing our fathers through new eyes might be generative of new possibilities for becoming men/sons/fathers. This also moved us to wonder about potentialities in terms of our own way of fathering others who perhaps consider us to be a father figure in their life.

The guiding theoretical framework in this study was postmodernism. With a concern for storytelling, blurred genres and new ways of composing ethnographies where no single version of truth is privileged, our writing is at home within Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) eighth historical moment (i.e., *the fractured future*) in the evolution of qualitative research. In keeping with Pelias, (2015), here, we believe “Our intent should never be to offer the final account; instead we should give the best account we can in our given circumstances. Doing so opens the door to dialog.” That said, we have been careful not to let our interests in “post-this and that” (Pelias, 2014) prevent us from speaking only about our uncertainty; so we have assembled poetic moments from each of our lives, juxtaposing bits and pieces to show individual voices but collective experiences. Piecing together images to create a picture of us growing around an immovable rock (Davies, 2020), we are creating a “new” space we can project ourselves into (Tamas, 2017). The rock—that is so hard—we have grown around and, the poem-like creations we share here provide a lens—like a crystal—which when looked through, produces new realities. “What is new is what had been obscured by a previous image” (Denzin, 2001, p. 29).

Upon returning from ECQI, we exchanged emails and agreed to tweak our writing, incorporating helpful comments/feedback/suggestions we received from the audience members at the conference. We then re-circulated the newer iterations of our writing among ourselves. As a way of interrogating what our writing can do, we continued with a “...‘round-robin’ email approach to share our ideas” (Lahman et al., 2010, p. 42), outlining the stories and sections of each other’s texts that resonated with us the most. Our emails acted as *resonance letters* (Meier & Wegener, 2017), highlighting which sections of our writing carry the potential to *move* other readers as we have been moved by each other’s writing. They also gave answers to our constant self-questioning, *but does the writing work* (Gale, 2018)? This toing and froing therefore served to scale back our original presentation, helping us decide which sections of prose to keep (i.e., include) and which to discard (i.e., exclude) in our *verbal construction* (Faulkner, 2007).

Given the volume of our combined writing, as a way for a "... reader to come to know ... through very few words" (Glesne, 1997, p. 206), we agreed to rework our conference presentations in a more expressive, poetic format. We set ourselves the goal of creating a 1000-word poemish (Lahman et al., 2019) *precis* of our ECQI presentations. Glesne (1997, p. 213) notes, "Poetic transcription moves in the direction of poetry but is not necessarily poetry." So by writing with each other's appreciation of our writing in mind and focusing on those "resonant" bits of our transcripts, we moved in the direction of poetry re-transcribing our presentations "... as a means to enlarge understanding ... and move closer to what it means to be human" (Faulkner, 2016, p. 16).

To summarize, we worked collaboratively, writing and sharing our ideas on what the other had previously written through a series of email exchanges. Below are the poetic compositions resulting from our combined efforts "... to give ourselves over to a different mode of knowing: to poetry's knowing" (Faulkner, 2007, p. 218).

Poetic Compositions

Gabriel

This dance that never started and will never end

I remember us walking down streets
with him pointing at women:
"Did you notice that she was looking at you?"
"You are attractive and you will like them too..."

Walking with him
Simple moments that frame who I am
Shaping the way I walk, the way I see
*1

I am not sure how the distance started...
Maybe it was always there
For years it was me the one who listened
Of his problems
Hours listening what was going on his job
Then on the trial, the news, the crisis

But this was unbalanced,
What about me?
What about me feeling lonely?
Me feeling an outsider at school
Me not knowing how to approach other people....

The distance was always there
It's just that it was covered
Having him as the center...

*

It was not easy to see him as flawed
That maybe all the stories about others
were stories about himself...
Not being able to deal with them.

I needed to understand women differently as well
After understanding that his stories
Were his and not mine

*

After losing his job and his career
It was harder to be around him
He would just talk about issues and more issues
No space for anything else
He was always waiting for the day
All would be ok again,
The money would come back at any moment
And it never did...

*

One day we 'hired' him to do some home improvements
As a way of helping him...
The result was not the expected
He fought with my -then- partner
Later on that week, speaking on the phone,
I don't remember well what I said,
But he replied
"you cannot talk like this to your father"
I felt so frustrated, because he was treating me like a child,
So, I said OK
And I stopped talking with him...

*

It was not easy to develop my own identity
To create a person different than him
Mostly because it meant to not be understood
Or even seen
By him.

The distance was always there
Because he never got the difference

Between us
He never got that I read books
Or that I would practice arts
Or like philosophy
*

One day he left
It was not painful as I thought it would be
Their relationship was not good
And the pain was more about not knowing
How *he* would be by himself
*

The distance with him
Helps me to develop myself
To explore ways of being a man
That are not the ones my dad
And his dad
Would embody
I have been looking for ways
To connect with my feelings
To find the manners
That feel truer

This challenge is not just about my dad
But about the ways of being a man
Around me
It is not about him as a person
But as the representative of a culture
The representative of a way of understanding
Life
Masculinity
Women
Body
And a large etc.
*

Understanding my father
Not just as a person
But as part of a whole community
As son of my granddad
As brother of his brothers
Makes me see further
Understand
How different it can be
The persona we become

*

I became a father-figure for my brothers
I guided them, showed them what I found
On life
They followed so many of the things I found
And fought for...
As if those things were normal

I fathered them...
Took interest in
Their development,
Their interests,
Their abilities.
I am proud of the men they have become...

*

One morning, he came in to woke me up
It was mother's day and he said
"lets do a nice breakfast for mum"
I liked those times
They were happy
When I saw love between them...

*

He used to play the flute in the night
Before we fell asleep
And I loved it so much
But with the new-big-job he stopped playing
And the old wooden flute was broken
Instead, we would stay awake to see him on the evening news
Intrigued about all the things he was doing
And proud of his achievements.

One of his birthdays, I convinced my mum
To buy a new wooden flute
He did not like it...

*

The distance was always there
But it was not noticeable
Or it was better to not see it

*

One day I had a fight with my brother
He said to me
"you cannot hit someone younger than you"
And he slapped me on the cheek.

*

He tries
I know he tries
But in a way that is not nice
He does not get some boundaries
Some things that are uncomfortable
Or important
He tries to break the distance
But the distance is there.

*

Maybe the distance is not the problem
But the lack of awareness
Of this distance
This distance that makes me different
That distance that he needs to understand
Not eliminate
This distance that makes me the man I have become
This man that he (maybe) does not understand

*

Sometimes I wonder about time
How these lives unfold
Mine and his
How these events and relationships
Produced so different people
But sometimes I look at a photograph of myself
And I can see some gestures
That I know I have seen in him
The distance collapses for a second
How close are we?

*

So I wonder about the mistakes I will make
I wonder about the relationships I have not managed well
And the ones that I will mess up
And the distance collapses again

*

He calls me
Without any reason
And that is the surprise
That there is no apparent problem behind his call
No demand
Just a question, "how are you?"
Not perfect, but good enough
It shows me he still cares

And loves

Despite the distance.

Daniel

Facing the uncannies (Roselló, 2017) of my child- and adult-hood, I want to trace the here-and-nowness of being an adult child of an alcoholic and just as a tree meets the problem of the large rock underneath it by growing roots around it;
my life has grown around the large immovable rock of *his* problem-drinking.

Finding and discovering by investigation love and forgiveness in a son-father relationship where it was difficult to say, "I love you" (Clarke, 2018).
Then, I want to honor and celebrate loving in son-father relations.
Rather than asking, what does it mean to be an Adult-Child-Of-an-Alcoholic; I ask how is it to be *with* this Adult Child of Alcoholic-ness *now*?

This text of "the self..." is becoming an "...occasion of folding and unfolding selves, *tracing* selves as continuous becomings in relation" (Gannon, 2013, p. 235).

Relating to my father's drinking, I want to trace the selves and subjectivities co-implicated in my father-son relationship.
**

Living with cancer,
suffering with two brain tumors,
my Dad died in hospital in 2014 with me by his side.

Throughout my life,
traces of his troubles have kept turning up,
again and again.

"I am interested in matter, both as a noun *and* as a verb - as mattering..." (Thomson, 2020, p. 2) so I am *tracking down* the uncanny matter mattering,
assembling traces of

who he was,
and
what he was like,
at his worst.
It matters to me, for example, this material matter of:
alcohol
(hidden under)
a tea cosy.
**

We all carry a rucksack, and
there are stories sliding around:
folded, unfolded,
“enfouled and enfoundling” (Davies, 2020, p. 1),
inside all of us.
There are many stories sliding around inside of me now.
**

When my Mum was diagnosed with
myotonic dystrophy, her GP advised my Dad to
stop smoking; reasoning it would help
slow the deterioration of her health.

I hated being around him when he was
smoking and drinking, and
I spend my life, trying to get him to stop.
He didn't
**

On the wall in my study at home,
a shelf now hangs,
emptied of most of its original contents,

He started a collection of miniatures for me.
Just like family and friends, Dad would add to the collection.
When I was 16 - in secondary school-, I made a shelf for them in woodwork class.

When I came home from University -in my first year of study- to
visit family and friends;
I found that the **bloody bugger** had only gone and
drank every bloody last one of them.

No acknowledgment, apology or replacement.
**

Dad turned into a shadowy figure.

When his drinking got all too much for her,
my Mum moved around the corner, to
live with her Mother and Brother.
They were more reliable in giving her the care she needed.

Losing his temper, he used to say things like:
“They didn’t want to know me. They didn’t want to know me”.
And
“Son, you don’t even know you are born”.
And
“You’ll never understand”

But,
if you don’t tell me,
I never will!
**
Ring. Ring. Son.

I was born, after
This ring
Was first sworn
To be worn
To say
I love you.

I was born, through
This ring
But
“Son, you don’t even know you are born”

Attached, to
This ring
I am
Still,
Being born.

Maybe
Perhaps, through
This ring
A Baby Clarke, will be
Born
Attached, to

This ring

Son, Daughter,
You don't even know you are born
**

After his Father died,
his Mother turned to
booze, and she
took in a lover whose
older children also moved in.

Compared to my Dad,
these older children were *men*:
stronger, rougher, tougher and
one was a boxer.

They kicked him out of his bed and he had to sleep on the floor:

“We had to sleep with coats over us! But...
Son,
you'll never understand”
**

While receiving chemo and just before he went into hospital,
I thought he was off the *booze*.
He wasn't.
As the sole Administrator of his Estate, it fell to me to close his bank account.
On one of his final statements...:

1. Bargain Booze
2. Bargain Booze
3. Bargain Booze
4. Bargain Booze
5. Bargain Booze

6. Bargain Booze

**

Although he was kicked out of his own bed
Although he didn't stop smoking
Although he drank all my miniatures
Although he drank his way through chemo
Although.... Although... Although....

He still
 took us on our first family holiday to Italy when I was 10
 He still
 took me to keyboard lessons on Monday nights
 He still
 paid for me -4 years on the trot, during my undergraduate!- to
 spend the summer in America with my girlfriend
 He still
 came to all my graduations ceremonies, **sober!**
 He still
 gave me the ring he used to propose to my mum with, so I could propose to Amy
 He still
 gave me his wedding ring to melt down and make both mine and Amy's wedding ring
 He still
 did the best fathering he could
 He still
 eventually became the father I always wanted
 He still... He Still.... He still....

**

All the '*Althoughs*' and
 all the '*Stills*' are
 folding in and
 stretching out.

**

Tracing his troubles,
 learning to love,
 I have written to
 inscribe my identity as an adult child-of-an-alcoholic in language,
 presenting his troubles to myself in a manner that is
 "not so scary" (Roselló, 2017, p. 246).

My writing has become an act of remembering that
 although he had his troubles,
 he is still my Dad and
 our bond continues (Paxton, 2018).

David

Holiday calls for Christmas—another for birthdays
 Missed calls equal missed opportunities to have a conversation
 Trying to force into existence a relationship that will only come through forgiveness
 Instead, I focus on dissolvment of the toxic interactions we have

Keeping a pretense of a relationship to satisfy a social expectation—a family expectation
 This pretense of a relationship is not working too well for me
 Nor is it working for my dad. We both deserve better, more
 Just as we have come to believe that [people] have a right
 And perhaps a duty to dissolve abusive relationships...
 Perhaps this assumption will be extended to relationships between child and parent—
 even adult children (Chapin, 2002)

My mother was caught in a winding, suffocating sheet of repressed anger and frustration
 (see Petry, 1975)

A sheet representing white male privilege. The man goes to work;
 the wife stays home, makes the meals and does the laundry.
 On the clothesline, Mom hangs the sheets engulfing and suffocating her (Purnell, 2013) ⁱⁱⁱ
 She is finally able to escape the suffocation when she leaves my father.
 She becomes a single mom and I lose an already fragile connection to a man—
 who is not present, absent.

What I did not realize until this process of writing this narrative
 By choosing to live with my mother, my father interpreted this as rejection.
 Rejection I now equate to a divorce between my father and me.
 My father has distanced himself from me and I from him
 This distancing does not help my father and me find any type of resolution—not now,
 not in the future

All narratives are a dynamic never-ending story (Charlés, 2008)
 Perhaps resolutions come as the pages are unfolded,
 Narratives are not a finished manuscript; they represent a moment in time.
 For that moment, the best and healthiest resolution may not be a happy ending; The
 best resolution may be an end, some things don't end well—they simply end (Purnell &
 Bowman, 2014).

What does it mean to end a relationship with my father? It is not an erasure
 However, my father is absent in my life, absent in my photographs
 There has only been a speculative hope of what might be one day.
 Ending this relationship, means erasing the *what ifs* of possibility
 It adds to the silence or what McGuire (1985) calls an open silence full of meaning—
 open to interpretation.

The silence actually helps me to reflect on my role in the estrangement with my father.
 I have been chiseling away at this boulder that blocked access to my father,
 Over the years, as I thought I was making headway around this obstacle,
 However, I was actually creating a more difficult obstacle to overcome.
 The broken pieces that fell from the boulder became a dense solid wall—a wall I built.
 As I take fingers to my keyboard trying to figure out how I am going to proceed,
 I begin think about the scars this relationship has imprinted upon me.
 Scars are living reminders of how physical or emotional pain effects our lives.

By triggering emotional responses from the cicatrix created by these wounds,
I am reminded of how the scars of a failed father/son relationship still haunt me.
The bodily marking that these scars have left upon me form petroglyphs
Telling a story of my failed relationship with a man who was absent, not there—a man
called father

We make decisions about when or how to try to *fix* relationships or situations
We do this with obsolete scripts requiring a happy ending
Trying to force a happy ending keeps us stuck in these difficult relationships
Instead of happy endings we need *necessary endings* (Purnell & Bowman, 2014).
We need to end stagnant relationships that become unchangeable—in order to find change

Every act of writing a person's life is inevitably a violation
"Language can never contain a whole person" (Josselson, 1996, p. 62).
As I learn this failure of language, I begin to see the damage of my own words.
The damaging words that I thought were breaking up the boulder
Continued to add to the wall being rebuilt; I begin to see my own failures—as a son

I always feared my father, but I step out of the fear and let anger control my thoughts,
"You are the one to blame; you are the one who abandoned me."
In my anger, I can hear how much of my anger I take from my father
I can hear how much of it is tied to an ethereal definition of masculinity
I can hear how destructive anger is. I fear that my father lives in me;
I fear the anger waiting at the ebbing tide of my life.
I realize that I cannot continue being the vessel that harbors this anger—I visit my father
The first thing that struck me when I went to my father's house was his eyes
His eyes were always filled with defiance in the past. Now, they were sad.
The sadness was deep and showed (perhaps) a realization of the cost of stubbornness
A stubbornness we both share; The sadness showed a regret.
Regret for all of the lost time that could never be regained—But perhaps start anew?
My father invites me inside. We sit on the couch as he starts telling me a story.
"When we lived in San Diego, your mom and I knew this couple
I remember this time your mom offered to watch their eight children.
They needed to go to a funeral back East and could not afford to take their kids.
I am not sure why your mom liked them. The father was a real asshole.
He was so mean. If the kids dared to look at him in the eyes, he would hit them.

He would get mad for no apparent reason and make his kids miserable—He was a terrible
father."

Discussion

Through the poems above, we have explored the connections of our individual narratives with our respective father. Each of us has a different process of dis/connecting with them, ushering in different emotions, and different implications for the impact fathering has on our lives. In each case, the relationship is relevant and has marked who we are and who we have become. Our father–son relationship seems a fertile place to consider our masculinity, reflect upon our place in society, and rethink the ways we want to take care of others. In our own father–son relationship, we start understanding what it means to live in this society, what our role is as men, how we are expected to behave and how we, as men, can care for ourselves and others.

We need to either figuratively or literally face our fathers in order to consider ourselves. This reflection-in-action sometimes means we need to get closer to our respective fathers and sometimes means to take distance and separate ourselves from our fathers in order to affectively engage the impact on our individual sense of self.

Reflections on Fathers and Fathering

It is activism to question the conditioned psychological roles that we have been given and/or expected to demonstrate as men. Our challenge to roles is an act that installs a process in us, a process of getting in contact with our emotional needs, and to challenge who we are with others. Sometimes, it means to get distance from some people and get close to others. To break a pattern means to make changes. Distance and closeness with our father works not as a physical process, but an ontological one. We get closer or distant to someone who is constitutive of our subjectivity. How to assemble and disassemble from our father is felt in our bodies as a process of change and becoming.

As a practice of identity, a practice of caring and responsibility, *fathering* is a way of making meaning of our individual voices and collective experiences. Our experiences are an invitation to difference as a tool for learning. The process of dreaming a different father, creating a different image of caring and diffracting (Barad, 2014) our identity, changes the way we understand our relationships, and therefore our ways of *fathering*.

Our ways of caring are shaped by the caring figures we have interiorized. In this way, *fathering* is an act of caring connected with our emotional needs and the needs of others, not restricted to biological bonds. From this, we can make new kin (Haraway, 2016), maybe not with our blood relatives, but with those we choose to be family.

Masculinity and Transmission

We understand that our sex and our gender are not necessarily aligned. The ways we perform our gender identity are shaped by our culture, and this culture is also expressed in our family. In psychoanalysis, it is common to propose that the ego is shaped by the internalization of the paternal figures. Butler explains:

There is a ‘kind of thought’ about masculinity and femininity, understood as equivalent to the thought of sexual difference, that takes place in the course of a transmission, and it is understood as a relay or a transposition; the mobility and temporality of this thought, although partially conscious, ‘is primarily an unconscious process’. (Butler, 2012).

In general, it is assumed that the transmission of identity happens through primary relationships, especially regarding masculinity and femininity. For this reason, we return to the relationship with our fathers and consider it as connected with our own masculinity. Manhood seems a concept embedded in different cultural practices and performances, with a cohesion that results from father/son unconscious transmission. In our work, we are trying to show how this transmission can be challenged, in the course of our lives. Through these poems, we are working against the “unconscious” transmission that happened with our fathers. Through reflexivity and self-awareness, and through reflection on our relationships, we try to challenge the “toxic” parts of our socially shaped masculinity.

But if something about sexual difference persists, I am not sure that what persists are established semantic ways of organizing sexual difference, already formed legacies of the past that are relayed into the present without translation or transposition, without some loss or new twist and turn, without some queer derailment or deviation. (Butler, 2012, p. 13)

Butler proposes that there is a process of deviation from the transmission of sexual difference, and it is this process of change what we are trying to exemplify in our poems: how there is a *distance* between us and our fathers, and how we work to create new identities and new masculinities. Hence, when we think of our role as fathers or father figures, which we have named *fathering*, we are being mindful of the possibilities for change towards what “manhood” could be, in its becoming through social transmission. Furthermore, as we make new kin (Haraway, 2016), we become active part of the cultural becoming.

Feminism

How can writing about fathers be considered feminist work? We are using our stories to revisit what we have understood to be the meaning of being a man. Through this exploration, we found new ways to grow around and/or chip away at the rock of estrangement in our father/son relationships. This rock represents both our individual fathers and our challenge of masculinity. Understanding our father–son relationships seem to be the starting point of the individuation needed to become the man we want/ need to be.

Avoiding toxic masculinity requires that each of us does *not* replicate our prior father–son relationship or the version of masculinity presented to us. We need a discontinuity in the processes by which masculinity is transmitted. This means to work

between the social and the psychological: we need new schemes, new practices, new relationships. Our resonant writings have sought to progress and energize these needs.

Drawing from the strength of our shared experiences, we have recognized that in order to make change within the more powerful domination of male masculinity, we needed to combine our narratives instead of speaking from isolated voices. This has transformed the way we understand the violence of how masculinity is perceived by boys and young men today. This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as “normal” and “just the way boys are” has also called on us to push back against these norms and give a different perspective on what it means to be masculine and what it means to be a father.

Activism

We developed this project with the idea of inquiry as activism. Our exploration of our father–son relationships aims to challenge social norms and realize the way our identity has developed through interwoven experiences with our respective fathers and each other. Through this exploration, we arrived at the need to change the social codes and rules that define what it means to be a man and explore masculinity in the context of feminism. We must speak out for others to stop viewing toxic masculinity as normal.

According to Wade (1997, p. 25):

any mental or behavioral act through which a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any... type of disrespect or the conditions that make such acts possible, may be understood as a form of resistance.

Thus, writing in a way that challenges ourselves, allowing us to engage in resisting the oppression caused by practices of masculinity constitutes our practice of inquiry as activism.

We agree with movements such as #metoo. As such, we need to acknowledge the need to change deeply rooted behaviors. These behaviors can be understood as psychological dynamics and social interactions. Viewed in this way, we need to be reminded how elements that are working together need to be challenged together. With understanding comes the possibility of change and the potential for creating new plots for our life, becoming better fathers for ourselves, our children and anyone who falls into our purview of care.

Opening...

Our journey started at the ECQI conference where our individual voices in each of our papers resonated loudly and there was additional appetite among the audience to further understand these collective experiences in the light of feminism. There is still

more to think about and to reflect upon, in both academia and our own lives. The work we have done is not separated from the persons we are every day, from the practices we engage in our quotidian, from the way we say “hi” to people, from the way we kiss our partner or hold our son. Our reflections regarding our fathers have taken us to a deeper place, raising questions about *who we are* and *who we want to be* in the process of caring for others: in our fathering.

This “body” of writing opens a discussion on the question of what it means to be a man and to be a father. This role is crucial for us, as we reflect how fathering (together with mothering) is the capacity to care for others, for not only the present but also, and more importantly, the future. Some of the roles associated with masculinity have proved damaging to the health of men. Many men have been socialized in a way that tends to disconnect them from their feelings and emotional needs. Through this collaborative writing, we found each other’s words resonating an acknowledgment of not only our emotional needs, but our desire to push back against the accepted social narrative of what it means to be a man.

We imagine a different father: a father that is aware of their emotional needs. That is able to talk, share, and be open to a conversation about *us*. A father who understands the damage of silence, who accepts difference, and who helps us find the person we are to become.


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Notes

1. We use asterisks (*) as a way of fragmenting the timeline and introducing other images or thoughts.
2. The original publication of this narrative was written in a Halibun style of writing. For this narrative, I have removed the Haiku and written in simple prose.

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