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# The awkward spaces of fathering [book review]

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## The awkward spaces of fathering [book review]

### **Abstract**

This review starts with PiriWeepu, the All Black and rugby world cup winner. An image depicting Weepu bottle-feeding his child was removed from a national anti-smoking advertisement in early 2012. What could be wrong with this tender moment between father and daughter? The image raised controversy because it conflicted with carefully scripted advertising campaigns promoting breastfeeding.

### **Keywords**

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### The awkward spaces of fathering

Stuart C. Aitken, Ashgate, Farnham, 2009. 253 pp. ISBN 978-0-7546-7005-6.

This review starts with Piri Weepu, the All Black and rugby world cup winner. An image depicting Weepu bottle-feeding his child was removed from a national anti-smoking advertisement in early 2012. What could be wrong with this tender moment between father and daughter? The image raised controversy because it conflicted with carefully scripted advertising campaigns promoting breastfeeding. In this instance, 'breast is best' trumped any reason to show a father feeding their child. *The Awkward Spaces of Fathering* offers a challenge to such depic-

tions of parenting. Aitken connects his readers with fathers, not in comparison to or as lesser parents than mothers, but as a form of emotional work to be understood on its own terms.

What are awkward spaces? Aitken argues that fathers' everyday actions spring from particular spatial framings. These spatial frames are constructed by traditional representations of fathers and inherited family ideals. But these notions of fatherhood cannot be reconciled with everyday practice: the result is the awkward and incoherent spaces of fathering. For Aitken, this awkwardness is unavoidable and should be embraced in fathering concepts – this is a process of continually 'becoming' a father.

Aitken experiments methodologically within this project. With ethnopoetry the author pulls apart the transcripts of his interviews to reconstruct the text in prose. This method frames seemingly heightened emotional responses (although Aitken is cautious to distinguish between emotions and non-representable forms of affect – a distinction crucial to his analysis). This innovative method is revealing of both the emotional work of fathering and the care Aitken takes with the fathers' stories. Beyond this, ethnopoetry demonstrates the in-depth relationships Aitken has formed with his participants – a highlight of the text.

Examining film and cinematic representations of fathers works less well for Aitken's argument (chapter 4 and 7). The non-representational framework does not translate film as effectively as it does narrative. There will nonetheless still be much of value to geographers interested in film analysis. For me, those chapters devoted to a particular participant (chapter 6, 8, 10 and 11) were far more enjoyable to read, with an argument seamlessly elaborated in and through their narratives.

'Stretching the imagination' (chapter 6) hones in on the core concern of fathering as emotional work in its most accessible way. The basis of fathering in gender is taken apart by discussing the experience of Cindy. Cindy, in a same-sex relationship, recalls the process of becoming 'daddy-girl' to her non-biological son. It is worth quoting Aitken at length here:

This is not about killing old notions of fatherhood. Rather, it requires avoiding positioning fathers in opposition to mothers, men in

opposition to women; it means removing the identities of fathers from fixed time and space, and it means not setting up the actual father (and the emotional work of fathering) in opposition to the ideal father (and discourses of fatherhood) (p. 124).

Aitken undoubtedly achieves this aim. The book suggests how a revised concept of fathering can be incorporated into a politics of becoming 'other'. This means a father becoming other than their father and other than the patriarchal limits of society. Becoming does not emphasise static categories or identities of fathers but establishes a 'coming community'. Fathering can then be conceptualised as contributing to social relations of community and family across space and time – with the care and welfare of children paramount. This is an important contribution to scholarly and public discourse on the changing role of fathers in family and community life.

As a father in my first year of parenting, I conclude on a personal note: I read much of the book in the company of my six-month old son. *The Awkward Spaces of Fathering* easily supersedes any parenting book I have read previously. The balance between light-heartedness and honest depictions of the (sometimes) traumatic aspects of parenting was inspiring. The book has immense appeal to geographers interested in post-structuralist, non-representational and feminist theory and also ethnographic methods, but will resonate particularly well with parents.

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