

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

# Academic Motherhood and COVID-19

Double Issue Fall 2020 / Spring 2021  
Volume 11, Number 2 / Volume 12, Number 1



Anna S. CohenMiller, Casey Schachner, Nathalie Ségeral,  
Poh Tan, Alexandra Kisitu, Mairi McDermott and many more





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## *The Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* (ISSN 1923-4139)

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## Contents

Spiraling <i>Anna S. CohenMiller</i>	9
Colour Tribulations: A Mothering-ArtAdemic in a Pandemic <i>Meaghan Brady Nelson</i>	21
The Poetry of the Pandemic <i>Lauren E. Burrow and Tonya D. Jeffery</i>	47
Pregnancy and Pandemic <i>Casey Schachner</i>	73
Problematic Intersections: Dance, Motherhood, and the Pandemic <i>Tracey Norman</i>	93
A Problem of One's Own: Single Mothering, Self-Reliance, and Care in the Time of the Coronavirus <i>Robin Silbergleid</i>	109
Reflections of a Chinese Academic Mom Struggling to Survive a Pandemic <i>Catherine Ma</i>	125

CONTENTS

Academic Single Mothering during a Pandemic <i>Nathalie Ségeral</i>	139
Identity and Connection as Working Mothers during the Pandemic: An Autoethnographic Account <i>Brittany Arthur and Batsheva Guy</i>	157
Frontline Workers from Home: A Feminist Duoethnographic Inquiry of Mothering, Teaching, and Academia during the Initial Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic <i>Salsabel Almansori and Kimberly M. Hillier</i>	170
Proving Our Maternal and Scholarly Worth: A Collaborative Autoethnographic Textual and Visual Storying of MotherScholar Identity Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic <i>Elizabeth Spradley, Sarah LeBlanc, Heather K. Olson Beal, Lauren E. Burrow, and Chrissy Cross</i>	189
Unseen Roles of Women during COVID-19: How the Echo of an “Mummy, I Love You” from a Six-Year-Old during a Zoom Meeting Redefined Mothering <i>Poh Tan</i>	211
Viral Loads and Immunities: Reflecting on Neoliberalism, Motherhood, and Academia during the COVID-19 Pandemic <i>Alexandra Kisitu</i>	219
The New Normal? Work, Family, and Higher Education under COVID-19 <i>Susan E. Mannon</i>	229
Learning from the Experiences of Mothers of School-Aged Children on Tenure Track during the COVID-19 Global Pandemic <i>Mairi McDermott</i>	247
The Continuous Clock: A Working Academic Mother During COVID-19 <i>Kristen Hicks-Roof</i>	265

Surviving the COVID-19 Pandemic with a Wolf Pack and the Marco Polo App <i>Heather K. Olson Beal</i>	277
The Challenges of Being a Mother and an Academic Researcher during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil <i>Maria Collier de Mendonça and Milena Freire de Oliveira-Cruz</i>	287
<b>Contributor Notes</b>	<b>309</b>



# **Academic Motherhood and COVID-19**



## Spiraling

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*During COVID-19, people's lives suddenly changed, and many faced severely unjust experiences. This article focuses on one such group—mothers who work in higher education. It draws on research and informal discussions with women across Asia, Europe, Australia, and the United States. It is a story about the fictional characters, Li and Laura, but is informed by international research about mothers in academia with children learning at home during these unprecedented times.*

*For Li living in Asia, she felt the stress of the world when the virus officially was deemed a pandemic. It was like she and her home country of China were being blamed for the spread. Yet she still had to work to do—hundreds of students to teach, her own children to help through the stressful time, and her ailing mothers to care for, all in full lockdown. Her mind raced: What can I do? How do I make sure my family is okay?*

*Across the world in the United States, Laura heard the news of “some kind of virus” threatening the world, but it didn't seem real, until her good friend suddenly became really sick. Her fear skyrocketed. She tried to pretend everything was okay but couldn't stop thinking: What will Dana think? She's only four and won't understand why she was just sent home for the year. Then Laura's university closed its doors and required a quick overhaul of all her courses. The blackhole that Laura had been trying to avoid since her divorce started to envelop her again.*

*Li and Laura found one another online. They hadn't expected to become friends, weren't looking to, but ultimately it was their friendship that drew them out of depression, anxiety, and fear to see the potential for their lives and for the world as a whole.*

## Introduction

### 1. Li

“Mama?” said Yoon-Ha softly, as she looked up from her homework. The girl had just turned seven years old and sat patiently every day at the new desk, the beautiful new one which her ailing grandmother had recently ordered. Li glanced at her daughter, lifting her eyes from her computer and the books surrounding her. Deep inside, Li was proud of Yoon-Ha—of seeing her confidently practice her work, of seeing her commit to finish every page assigned, of seeing her consideration for others. But on the surface, Li had to maintain a different demeanour. She felt pressure to mimic how she grew up, always deferential to her elders and always trying to work better and harder.

Li’s heart longed to respond to Yoon-Ha’s call with gentle words and a soft gaze. Maybe something like she’d been reading in the mothering group she’d recently found online. Something like, *Hi Yoon-Ha, what do you need my dear? I love you and want to help you. Right now, mama has work, but I’ll be able to talk more soon, okay?*

She fought with herself as other words started to build in her mind: *Go back to your work. Stop bothering me. Can’t you see I’m busy?* But instead, she somehow found a middle ground with a direct and non-emotional response: “I’m about to start my Zoom class, Yoon-Ha. Why don’t you save your questions until I’m done?”

This was the new normal in many parts of Asia, which was the case in her homeland of China, as well as where she lived now with her family in Korea. Since the end of February, many places had been on lockdown because of the virus. It came suddenly, just like the warnings from her ancestors who foresaw of such times. *But really, a virus? How could something so small, wreck such havoc?!* This wasn’t a real question Li had though. She knew the reality of health crises. It was her training after all, as a public health specialist. Li had internalized a message about her work. She would often think, *Off to save the world!* But then question, herself, *why have I put so much pressure on myself, right?* Instead, Li felt like a small piece of a puzzle that was missing the box-top, working towards something that she couldn’t quite figure out but which she was pushed forwards to complete. She had spent years in university and graduate school studying disease and health, examining challenges facing rural and urban communities, as well as working to devise solutions that could be applied across all communities. Growing up in a collectivist culture instilled in her the idea that everyone works together for a common goal, and ending disease always seemed like the most obvious direction. She would think, *everyone gets sick at some point in their life, right? So why not work to help everyone feel better.* It was a huge goal—fixing everyone, healing communities, and bringing wellness to a whole country or even region.

## 1. Laura

Thousands of miles away, in the United States, sat Laura staring at the TV. She couldn't believe what she was seeing and wondered, *can this really be happening? It doesn't make any sense. Maybe it's like SARS, which was mostly an Asian issue, right?* Laura could feel her throat start to tighten, a sure sign that she was dealing with fear. Her therapist had told to look for these kinds of somatic responses in her body, especially after major changes, like the end of her marriage. She had been young when she got married. She fell in love with the idea of having a soul mate, someone to finish her sentences and spend time with whenever she felt lonely. Years of American pop culture created the image of the young, handsome white man completing the broken heart of the equally beautiful and almost always white woman. The *Jerry McGuire* complex for sure. Marriages after that blockbuster can be traced back to vows with "You complete me," and Laura's was no exception. As she thought back to that beatific day many years ago—the flowy, poofy dress, the flower girls, the cherubic music—all she could think was *how could I have been so stupid?*

Laura had a streak of beating herself up. She would think back to a decision she made thirty years before as a young child and berate herself for days about how she could have chosen one path over another. She would question why she had chosen seemingly simple things, like the colour of a teapot, the design for a shower curtain, while more important decisions loomed large. Her degree, the city she was living in, when to have children, and lastly, her choice of partner all made her cringe. All made her feel like she had somehow opened the wrong book and gone down a path meant for someone else.

*Why did I marry him?* she would ask herself this again and again. Her therapist suggested self-help books (which made her feel like she wasn't trying hard enough), meditation (which made her feel spastic as she couldn't sit still), and yoga (which made her feel old). The last time Laura talked with her therapist—*Was it really already a month ago?*—she suggested finding community groups to meet with and talk through issues of grief. Yet the idea of showing up at some random space, or worse yet at a church community room, made her feel too vulnerable and exposed. Worse than having others see her weakness would be to show such a feeling in a place of worship. So, she kept up the brave face to others, appearing as if everything was normal—*I'm fine, you know. It's just life, right? What about you?* She'd respond to anyone who asked. She didn't let anyone know how she struggled; she didn't even admit much of her struggles to herself and definitely not to her young daughter who idolized her every move.

## 2. Li

Li squinted as she tried to focus her eyes on the screen. She had spent the last ten hours answering her students' questions, but she saw more emails and now texts asking for help. They needed her; they were scared about their grades and about the virus. So, Li tried her best; she answered every question as thoroughly as possible all while trying to learn the latest requirements from her university. Her internal monologue was extensive: *I have to record all my lectures now, okay, so that means I need to find a better video camera and somehow set up our living room to look like an office. How am I going to do that? How can I make sure that my daughter or my mother doesn't walk through in the middle?* Fortunately, Li had recently taken a course for online teaching; it was one of the latest university "recommendations." For Li, this meant she was required to learn more and do more for her work. And she did. In this case, it did seem to pay off, as she was at least a bit ahead of the curve in suddenly being thrust into online teaching. But her students, many of them struggled. The undergraduates didn't all have personal computers and didn't have the space at home to have a private space for class without others disturbing them.

Looking at the intricately carved wooden clock she had bought on her trip last year to Kazakhstan, she noticed it was close to 11:00 p.m. and jerked upright. *Why was it so quiet?* she asked herself. *Where was Yoon-Ha? Where was her mother? Where did they go? It's not like we live in a huge house. We live in a high rise squeezed together with everyone else! They haven't eaten. They must be desperate!*

"Yoon-Ha! Are you okay?!" Li called out anxiously, not knowing what the response was going to be.

From the far side of the apartment, Li heard a mumbled, soft voice "Hi Mama. We're over here." Followed by a softer response, "Please don't be upset." Li squeezed from behind her makeshift desk in the living room to the bedroom to find her daughter and mother snuggled together on the floor. Yoon-Ha was brushing her grandmother's hair as they sat beside the bed underneath a bedsheet atop chairs. *They created a fort! Where did Yoon-Ha learn that?* Then Li saw the food laid out; from the look of it, all their plates and silverware were lined up like a buffet on the floor.

Li felt a frog in her throat. Tears welled up in her eyes as she thought about all the work it would take to put away the food (that which wasn't destroyed already) and wash all the dishes. She was at her wits end and just wanted to run away, or scream, or both. But she couldn't. Li had a seven-year-old and a mother who was sick. She had to take care of them first. So, she did.

## 2. Laura

On most days, Laura could keep her fear at bay. This virus was really starting to freak her out though. It was supposed to be contained in China, but then she heard how it was spreading throughout Asia and how a traveller in Europe was found to have gotten sick. She heard about some people in the United States also coming down with a bad cold, a flu, or maybe the virus. And just yesterday, one of her good friends had to be hospitalized. So, today was not one of the days that her fear felt manageable. Laura felt alone, her husband gone, and her therapy session out of reach. She didn't even have any colleagues to bump into and chat with to ease some tension.

*Has it really been three weeks of teaching online?* Laura wondered. Her university had suddenly called all students back from internships and study abroad trips in the middle of March. At the time, she thought they were being overly cautious. *Why bring people back from Italy when the virus thing is mostly in Asia?* But then things changed worldwide, and it turned out the university had made a good decision.

For the past three weeks, Laura had been redesigning her courses. First, she used the university's online platform. It was clunky, but it worked. Then it was suggested to try something more creative to engage students. They kept on suggesting more things to include—more apps, more online programs, more platforms. It was suggested to create polls, surveys, to include presentations and collaborative opportunities, and to make sure to have synchronous times to see your students but also to make sure to have asynchronous where students can catch up. *Really?* she wondered. *There is just too much to learn. And these students need the basics of higher education, not bells and whistles.* Laura felt overwhelmed and remembered her therapist's suggestion to close her eyes and to breathe in peace and serenity and breathe out stress and fear. *Okay, breathe in peace and serenity and breathe out this f\*\*\*ing nonsense ridiculous stress and fear!* It wasn't exactly the peaceful meditation her therapist intended, but it did bring some relief.

While she was in the breathing out stage, frowning with eyes pierced shut, she jumped as something touched her shoulder. "What?!" It was her daughter Dana. At only four years old, Dana was bubbly, with the wide-eyed wonder of childhood. Her curly dark hair cascaded around her oval face. Laura would look into her daughter's eyes and see stories of her great grandparents—the altars, the incense, and the intricately woven cultural tapestry of their lives. Like many of her students, Laura, too, was a first-generation graduate. *Maybe this is why I push myself so hard,* she thought.

Dana was leaning on her mother's shoulders now, "What are you doing Mama?" Reaching behind her, Laura quickly and gingerly pulled her daughter around her back into her lap, "Ah mami! Por que estás despierta ahora, cariña?"

Why are you awake now my dear?” When talking to her daughter, Laura tried to forget everything else and just focus there. She had read about that once on one of those mothering groups—”Try to be present with your child. This is their now, and there is no future or past for them.” So, she tried. Laura listened as Dana started to talk about her *pesadilla*, the bad dream where some bad creature came and made her never see her friends again. Unfortunately, the dream wasn’t too far from the truth. That virus she had seen spreading from day to day led to Dana’s preschool closing indefinitely, which meant her daughter hadn’t seen her friends for quite a while.

### 3. Li

With everyone finally asleep, Li lay there thinking. *Great, there’s quiet but now I can’t focus. I can’t think and yet I can’t work or sleep. Didn’t those American children’s stories say something about counting sheep? Why sheep?* After over an hour of trying to sleep, her back started to hurt from trying to lie still in the bed. Li wasn’t great at listening to her internal voice. Hearing voices was accepted in her family; it was accepted that spirits and messages would emerge at various times. The voice often tried to reach her, to tell her things: “Remember, you’re allowed to take care of yourself. You’re a smart, courageous, brave woman, like your grandparents before you.” She even somehow managed to ignore the voice even with direct messages: *Time to take a break. You haven’t eaten all day. Time to get up. You know that feeling in your lower stomach? That’s your body saying you need to go to the bathroom.* But Li tried to push those messages away to focus more on her work and her family, which made it even more strange this night when she did listen.

The little voice suggested she find somewhere to go where she wouldn’t feel so alone. It was 1:00 a.m. now. Li knew she couldn’t leave the apartment just in case her daughter or mother suddenly needed her. But she also knew deeply that she needed to find someone to talk to as well as commiserate and connect with. Her friends in town all seemed to have it together, but it was 1:00 a.m., so she didn’t feel as if she could call them, even if she had wanted to. She thought about her colleagues in her department: *I wonder what they’re doing now? Probably writing yet another top-tier journal article or getting their graduate students to do it for them.* Li had been fighting some negative feelings about her position in her university for a few years now. She had graduated from the top university in Korea, but it took a good four years to land a full-time secure job. During that time, she worked as a lecturer at various universities while her classmates—her male classmates—all got hired for better positions than hers, even some earning the extremely rare, tenure-track university ones.

*Ugh. Stop focusing on that. Just do your work.*

So, Li started thinking who else she could reach out to. She did have some

friends in other parts of the world that theoretically she could have texted or even called at this time of night, but what would she say? *Hey, it's 1am here, and I'm a mess. How are you?* (Thinking back years later, Li did realize, that that is exactly what she could say to a friend. That was exactly what she later learned to do to reach out when she was feeling lonely.) So, she went to find a different solution. Li's fingers took over, and they started typing in the search bar. *Panic attacks, no, that's not it. Attention deficit disorder, no that doesn't seem right either. Cervical cancer, hmm. I have been having some discomfort lately... NO, that's not what's going on.*

Amid the number of medical conditions popping up in her browser, she also happened upon the mothering group she had stumbled upon in the past. It seemed that the search function not only expanded into future potential health problems but also remembered a history that had brought relief.

### 3. Laura

Laura hung up the phone, trying not to throw it across the room. Her soon-to-be ex-husband was calling with just one more request. *He calls them requests, but they're demands, and I'm so sick of it!* She swallowed hard tensing her body, took a deep breath, and went to check on Dana sitting on the floor in the other room. Now that the preschools had all closed, the only option for a snippet of time to do her own work was enrolling her daughter in online classes. Generally, they were lacking in some manner or another, either ill conceived (*Really, you want the kids to sit silently for an hour?*) or missing something on the technology side (*We can't hear you with all the video glitches, which makes it hard to learn the song you're trying to teach*). But Laura tried to think about how lucky she was compared to others. She at least had a job, even if it was a nontenure track position. Her daughter was healthy, and she now had the whole house to herself. *Was that a good thing? I guess that means I can rearrange the bedroom like I've wanted to for years. It's the little wins, right?*

She tried to focus on the positives as she walked over and snuggled next to her daughter. Dana was squinting her eyes and leaning close to the iPad trying to understand what her art teacher wanted her to do next.

Opening her laptop, Laura started to review her five classes. All of them had to be adjusted for teaching online, two of which she'd never taught before. Again, she tried to focus on the positive. *I have a job.* She wanted to advocate and talk to leaders, to administrators, or to anyone who would listen. *Teaching full time and having a child at home learning are too much. Isn't there something the university can do?* She was grateful for the job (she told herself this again and again). And she wanted things to change. Even when she wasn't teaching online, the fact she had been in a nontenure track job teaching the classes nobody else wanted was frustrating, to say the least. She saw her white colleagues promoted; she saw men she had taught hired into positions she wanted. And there she

remained—Laura as the Latina scholar, the Indigenous scholar, and now, the single mother scholar (*ugh*, she thought, “*single mother*” sounds like bad words).

Her colleagues didn’t mention their kids, at all. As a student in a different department, Laura never knew who had kids. She assumed everyone had chosen to be childless or all the kids were grown. When she was hired as a faculty member in an education field, she assumed people would discuss their families. *I bet faculty just don’t talk to their students about their families.* It was a surprise then when it took almost a year for her to learn who in the department had children. Many of them had children Dana’s age even, but families weren’t mentioned, and family members were never invited to come to events. It was like a taboo to have a family. Laura thought more about this. *Maybe it’s not a taboo for everyone, as the men in the department seem to be very proud of showing pictures of their kids when asked.* Laura soon saw the taboo about having a family existed for women. Being a mother was taboo. She knew she was supposed to be a mother, culturally. *Being childless doesn’t look good. Someone might think I’m incapable of having kids. “Baren” the term family would throw around to ensure newlyweds would try to have kids quickly.*

Scrolling to her inbox, Laura saw the tiny little red light indicating her unread messages. She felt a chill come over her. *I don’t even know where to start. How could there be so many messages sent in the last hour?* Laura’s vision started to blur. She didn’t know up from down. Then she was jerked back to the present moment by her daughter’s voice and crayons falling to the ground.

*Okay, get it together Laura.* Moving from the messages hounding her, she opened her social media account, going to that one space that brought her relief many months ago, the mothering group.

#### 4. Li

Scrolling through posts, Li saw how other mothers were struggling with finding their way forward during the pandemic. Mothers shared stories about trying to find ways to care for children at home when their jobs were being scaled back. Others talked about the requirements to continue working face-to-face, even though they had health issues of their own. And others shared specific problems they were encountering at work.

Li was drawn to one anonymous thread. The mother had posted “Remember, this isn’t a vacation.” The woman went on to explain that she worked full time as an administrator. She explained how one day in March, everyone was sent home with the requirement to work from home. They were told to make sure to find a quiet space to work away from family interruptions and to make sure to call or email back anyone who may contact them within ten minutes. And lastly, their managers had reminded everyone to not “goof off,” since, as they wrote, “This isn’t a vacation.”

*Whoa. How could anyone think that working at home during COVID, especially as a mother who may have childcare responsibilities, is vacationing? Although Li had various social media accounts, she didn't post much and didn't engage in many conversations. But in this instance, she was drawn to say something—to show support for this mother who was also working in academia. Li thought *I think she's in the United Kingdom? Well, that doesn't matter. One way or another, the message the poor woman received was entirely rude, disrespectful, and maybe even a type of bullying.**

#### 4. Laura

Something about the online mothering group really spoke to Laura. She liked the way the mothers would encourage one another—in their publications and in their teaching—and hear each other vent when things were hard. Most of those vents were anonymous, like the one that quickly rose to the top of her page. *Wow, 128 comments.* Laura started reading through them.

How could they think you were on vacation?!

WTF? Hang in there.

I'm going through something similar here but as a faculty member. The pressure to keep working non-stop and submit all our deliverables for grants is ridiculous. It's like they don't realize we're working during a pandemic.

You wouldn't believe the conversation I just had with a male colleague. I asked him how things were going, thinking that perhaps he was struggling to find time in his house to work with his three kids, just as I have been. But instead, he said, "Things are great actually. Life is so efficient now. I don't even have to commute to work. I've been able to do so much more writing than in the past." I wanted to punch him in the throat, or cry.

I also talked to another dad at my university, but he was totally stressed out. For the first time ever he said, he totally appreciated everything his kids' teachers did. He talked about his two kids being home all day and not giving him any peace. They had homework to do and Zoom classes but wouldn't sit in front of the computer patiently and instead would interrupt him when he was teaching online. At least he had someone else at home to take care of the kids most of the day.

Scrolling down, Laura read the most recent comment on the thread:

I hear that you're not on vacation. You're struggling, just like the rest of us forced into an unmanageable situation to take care of children learning at home and also our fulltime jobs. It's so strange how leadership doesn't seem to notice the needs of caretakers. For me, not

only do I have a young child at home but also a mother to care for. If you want to chat, it's 1am out here in Korea and would be happy to have a late-night talk.

## 5. Li and Laura

After she had pressed “Enter” on her post, Li just sat staring at the computer. She sat partially frozen from her courage to share a bit about her life in a public-ish arena (it was a private group), and from anticipating a message she hoped would show up.

Laura looked at her clock. It was just now 11:00 a.m. *11:00 a.m. here and 1:00 a.m. there.* Her mind was racing. She felt a deep urge to reach out to the woman in Korea who wrote that encouraging post.

A number “1” shining brightly on her computer suddenly showed up, indicating that Li had a new message:

Hi Li, My name is Laura, and I live in the United States. I saw your post to that mother about “not vacationing” and I was really touched by your response. I hope it's okay that I wrote, even though I'm not the person from the anonymous post 😊. There was just something in what you wrote that really spoke to me, and I could use to talk to someone who understands too.

Laura was proud of herself for reaching out. It's what her therapist recommended: “Find someone who understands what you're going through.” It was a little thing, to reach out, but for the first time in a while, Laura felt genuinely calm. Her mind was now gently wandering, until she heard a small ding, indicating she had a new message:

I'm so glad you reached out Laura! My mind was going somewhere I didn't want at 1:00 a.m. You know what they say, “Your mind is a dangerous place to go alone” 😊 I would love to chat!! So, here's a bit about me. Well things, I didn't already share 😊. My department is great ... in theory 😊. But I'm the only woman and the only one with fulltime responsibilities to care take of children and also a parent. My colleagues are really nice, but they just don't understand the extra toll this virus has taken on me, and, of course other mothers out here in Korea. Because here, mostly its mothers who are expected to manage everything—find someone to take care of kids, their schoolwork, the household chores, cooking too, and if there are elderly parents, then that too. Before everything closed down, I was managing though. My daughter was in school from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and then a friend would take her to private lessons, so I had the whole day to do my

work. My mother was taken care of by a local girl I hired, and she cooked and cleaned too. But now the girl had to return home, and I can't bring anyone in to help. Enough from me 😊. Tell me about you?

Li was now fully awake. She had moved into the kitchen, turned on a light, and even started to make tea. Then she paced, waiting for Laura to respond. She heard a ding:

Oh wow, Li, that sounds hard to be the only woman and to also have your mother with you to take care of! My colleagues are mostly women, but it's weird here 😞. Nobody talks about their families. It's like we're supposed to forget they exist when we come to work. But my daughter is a part of me; she's only four and needs me. If I left all thoughts of her at home when I went to work, it would be like I was cutting off one of my arms. But maybe that's part of my cultural upbringing; we're supposed to always think of family first. *La familia* as we call it.

As the first person in my family with a university degree, nobody else understands what I do, especially now that I'm online teaching. They just see me on my computer and figure they can talk to me whenever, call whenever, text whenever, and get a response immediately 😊. Maybe that email about not being a vacation is because some families think it is! So, yeah, my family thinks I'm on vacation, but I'm so not. I'm actually going through a divorce 😞, although it's for the best. We weren't compatible, and he just brought so much stress to my life. Our daughter doesn't get it. She's still just trying to figure when she can go back to class and see all her friends. Poor kiddo. She misses sharing her toys. She used to come home everyday with a new toy from a friend (sigh).

Anyway, I'm hoping to be promoted soon, hopefully to a secure job finally. Mine is just a contract from year to year. At least it's not class by class, but it still sucks because it seems like I've been pigeonholed into this position. I've heard about the academic pipeline "leaking" for mothers, but this is ridiculous! For me, it feels like nobody sent me the invitation to the pipeline. Or they decided to send me one for the wrong pipeline, the sewage line 😞.

Across time and space, Li and Laura wrote to each other. On that first day and night, they wrote back and forth for over two hours straight. Each waited eagerly for the other to respond, and they shared more details about their academic lives, their home lives, their cultural upbringing, and their aspirations. That was the hardest part for both of them. Neither of them grew up seeing how to consider their own needs as necessary, or even important. But something about the virus made them reconsider things. Thinking about health was a way to reconsider the importance of their lives. As mothers who

cared deeply for their children and who were responsible for their wellbeing, they needed to stay healthy, physically at least.

Over time, Li and Laura found encouragement in taking care of themselves. They started with the basics, helping each other to remember to eat regularly and even go to the bathroom. Both things they had been terrible at previously. They texted each other daily, jokingly checking in to see what they each had eaten for lunch or dinner. A gentle reminder that it is important to eat meals. One day, they started seeing how many times the other went to the bathroom. Through this practice, they started to learn and relearn fundamental aspects of self-care—essential components for them to effectively take care of themselves and anyone else, too.

Their jobs hadn't changed, their bosses didn't see their work any differently, their daughters were still at home learning full-time, but they felt different. For Li, not having any domestic help was still quite a challenge and often an impediment to what she wanted to achieve, but she also realized that maybe she could lower the bar. Maybe, just maybe, she was doing enough work.

For Laura, the pressure she felt to be 100 per cent at work and 100 per cent with her family became less important as she saw her colleagues and others less often. *This must be that contradictory demand of being the ideal worker and ideal mother, huh? Well, it will have to wait for someone else to grab hold!* thought Laura. So, if she stayed off most social media and chose carefully who she spoke to, Laura could keep moving forward.

## Coda

This time, Li decided she wanted to try something different. She wanted to take care of herself, and she knew it was important for her daughter and her mother too. For her to be at her best, she knew she needed to stop working when she was exhausted, and she knew she needed to eat. So, she tried something she remembered her daughter had done. She took out all the food from the fridge and all the plates and silverware and created a cocooned area. This time though, she set it up in the living room, an easier place to clean. *I can take care of myself, be responsible, and be sensible*, she thought, smiling to herself. This time she looked over to Yoon-Ha; her black hair neatly pulled into pigtails at the nape of her neck. "Hi Yoon-Ha, I'm over here." Then she added a little more quietly, and with a smile and a laugh, "Don't be mad."

## Acknowledgments

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## Colour Tribulations: A Mothering-ArtAdemic in a Pandemic

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*Using personal narrative as a feminist approach to producing knowledge, I describe how living in a pandemic creates the ultimate experience to conduct arts-based research on gender inequality for artists, educators, and professionals as well as the effects the process of artmaking can have on grief, depression, and anxiety. From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I experienced the death of two family members. With the stay-safer-at-home order, I was thrust into finding a way to balance the roles of caring for multiple generations of my family, quickly moving to teaching online, attempting to teach and care for my daughters, and dealing with the deaths of two loved ones. The order of social distancing caused my personal grief to remain in a fog. As a Mothering-ArtAdemic (Nelson and Combe), I needed to find a way to successfully mother, create, and teach in order to remain strong and heal for myself, my family, and my students. After tending to my stay-safer-at-home duties as a Mothering-ArtAdemic, I empowered myself to paint every day. This series of abstract paintings is called Colour Tribulations, as I played with colour to fight off the anxiety, troubles, difficulties, and constant uncertainty of living in a pandemic. Each painting represents an attempt to find peace as well as a sense of safety and calm in the midst of COVID-19 chaos. The paintings conceptually work through the multitude of stresses and anxieties that accompany mothering and teaching in the midst of a pandemic and transform them into meditation, colour, and forms of art therapy.*

### **Mothering-ArtAdemic**

In 2017, I claimed that the intersectionality of my complex identity roles of mother, artist, and academic reinforce one another, and when performed together, they make me stronger in each area (Nelson and Combe). These interdependent roles create stability by keeping me better informed,

emotionally grounded, and financially secure. Embodying these identities simultaneously as a Mothering-ArtAdemic results in a fluency that I would not have found if I had compartmentalized them; it is an empowering action towards dismantling the oppressive patriarchal institution of motherhood. As Andrea O'Reilly claims, "The term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word mothering refers to women's experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women" (Rocking 11). Rachel Hile Bassett argues that first-person narratives "play an important role in changing others' perceptions of parenting in academia and serve as well to broaden academic parents' own understandings of their situations" (12). Maria Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro are also "convinced that personal narratives have the potential to serve as critical intervention in the social, political, and cultural life of academia" (9). The following personal narrative is a feminist approach to producing knowledge on how living in a pandemic creates the ultimate experience to conduct arts-based research on the effects that artmaking can have on grief, depression, and anxiety.

## **Famiglia**

My maternal grandmother, Anne Palmera Serratto, my Nonnie, was the youngest of four children and the second to be born in America. Her parents and two older siblings were all born in Northern Italy. As a family, they immigrated to San Francisco and settled in North Beach, where my Nonnie was born August 9, 1923. North Beach, San Francisco was Nonnie's home for ninety-five years until July, 2019 when she moved in with my mother and father, seven minutes away from my home in Franklin, Tennessee. Over the next six months, Nonnie and my two young daughters, ages six and three, would spend their afternoons together. This happened organically, as the same week I was interviewing for an afterschool nanny, I was also interviewing for a caregiver for Nonnie. One candidate was qualified for both; therefore, I hired her, and although it was a bit chaotic to arrive home to, fall 2019 provided many cherished memories of four generations spending their days together.

Winter 2020 was an extremely hard time for my family. In late December 2019, Nonnie fell ill, and on Christmas Eve, we brought her home to hospice at my parents' house. To hospice a love one at home is a privilege that is emotionally and physically draining. Both my mother and I became very sick with the flu shortly after Nonnie came home to hospice. It took over a week to recover. On January 8, my body had not completely regained full energy when I drove to my university to teach the first day of spring semester classes, which was when I got the dreaded call from my mother. I could hear in her voice that

we had lost a family member, but I was shocked to hear it was not Nonnie. We had lost my uncle, Daniel J Ward, suddenly to a heart attack in the middle of the night. Daniel was my godfather and my mother's younger brother by ten years. A renowned DJ in Hawaii, he was full of life, love, and happiness. He was one of my mother's closest friends and a loving ray of light in my life as well. To suddenly lose him as we were slowly losing his mother was devastating on my family, especially my mother. I continued to teach a full load of four courses at my university while mothering my two young girls and spending every evening helping my grieving mother to care for her mother, who was slowing growing sicker. When Nonnie peacefully passed on January 28, I felt a loss I had never felt before. My Italian grandmother was an extremely smart and sassy woman, who taught me more about life than I'll ever learn from another person. She taught me how to be strong yet kind. She taught me how to be honest, direct, and empathetic. She taught me how to do one thing a day and how to look at life with happiness and humour. Nonnie was there for every big moment in my life, and it was she I would go to when I needed advice. She was the matriarch of our family and embodied the definition of a feminist in every way. Lynn Comerford, Heather Jackson, and Kandee Kosior state that "Feminism has encouraged women to make their own choices rather than having their choices made for them by individual and powerful social forces" (2). It was my Nonnie who taught me how to make my own choices in life and not fall prey to social forces. In O'Reilly's 2008 volume, *Feminist Mothering*, she reviews authors that write in the self-help genre that "call for a new style of mothering, one that advocates balance and admonishes guilt" (O'Reilly qtd. in Comerford, Jackson, and Kosior 41). My Nonnie lived each day with balance and showed no guilt for conducting her life as she pleased. She drove until she was ninety-five. She danced, she went bowling, she worked for the military by choice, and she mothered without guilt for doing the things in life that brought her pleasure. My Nonnie never needed to overcome the guilt of motherhood, as she never fell prey to it. I see these feminist qualities have been instilled in my mother, my sister and me, as we each raise our own young daughters.

In late February 2020 we celebrated the lives of Anne Palmera Serratto Ward and Daniel J. Ward in San Francisco, California, with a beautiful family event at the Italian Club in North Beach. The last time our whole extended family had gathered in one spot was over seventeen years ago at my wedding. Gathering together to share stories of their lives was an event of love for two amazing people. We laid their ashes together in the water of the San Francisco Bay, as a source of strength and healing for the family still standing on shore.

## Tribulations: Mothering and Grieving in a Pandemic

In early March 2020, I returned home to Franklin, Tennessee, with my husband and our two daughters. That week I was supposed to lead a group of Belmont University students to Guatemala on an arts-based therapy trip in order to work with local children who had experienced trauma. By this time, the reach of COVID-19 was growing, and my university canceled all international trips. The same week, the public schools in our community shut down due to COVID-19. My daughters stayed home, and at the time, we did not know whether they would not go back to school for that academic year. When my mother and father returned from San Francisco a week later, COVID-19 had reached our community, and we felt it was best not to see them for their own protection. Both have preexisting conditions: my mother has asthma and high blood pressure, and my father has a rare form of leukemia. In the mist of the COVID-19 stay-safer-at-home order (Moreno and Conradis), I continued to grieve the loss of my Nonnie and uncle while continuing to mother my two young daughters and constantly worrying about my own mother. She was grieving only seven minutes, away and I could not console her, I could not hug her; we could not grieve together due to the pandemic.

When my university moved to teaching online and the public-school system shut down, my daily routine quickly became a continuous cycle of feeding my children, walking them and the dog, teaching four courses online, teaching first-grade and preschool curriculum, feeding them again, and cleaning all while adhering to the stay-safer-at-home order. My husband's job as a sales director was thrown into overdrive, as he worked tirelessly to save people from being furloughed. This caused him to work long hours, many spent on the phone in meetings with others, who did not appreciate young children's interruptions. Therefore, along with many other female academics around the world, I struggled to find a balance between working from home and mothering (Minello). As the days of the stay-safer-at-home order went on and on, the orders of social distancing (Lipton and Steinhauer) caused my personal grief to deepen, and I grew depressed (see Figure 1).

As a Mothering-ArtAdemic (Nelson and Combe), I needed to find a way to be an empowered mother in order to gain strength and start to heal for myself, my family, and my students. As O'Reilly has argued, "mothers' content with and fulfilled by their lives make better mothers—children raised by depressed mothers are at risk—empowered mothers are more effective mothers" (*Rocking* 48). After tending to my stay-safer-at-home duties as a Mothering-ArtAdemic, I knew I needed to create space for situations that would empower myself to embody my identity as an artist. I needed to start painting.

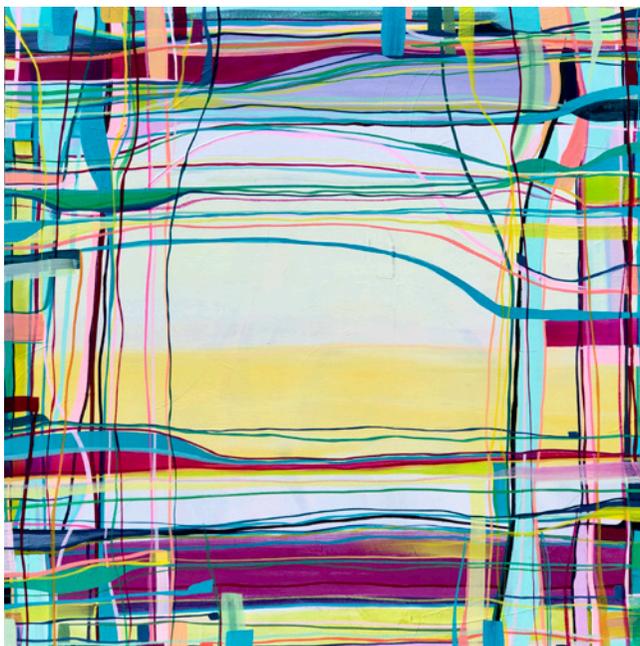


Figure 1. *Social Distancing*, March 2020, 36 x 36, Acrylic on Canvas Gallery Wrap

### **Colour Tribulations: Creative Making as a Form of Art Therapy**

My four-year-old daughter paints every day at her Montessori school. Staying safer at home, I wanted to continue this practice of artmaking for both my daughters. Using flowers sent as a thoughtful condolence, I set up a still life painting lesson (see Figure 2). Showing my daughters how to capture what they see on paper using oil pastels and watercolour paints, I watched their creative energy flow and was encouraged to step into the artmaking process. Playing with their artmaking materials inspired me to play further on a canvas in my home studio. The work completed from this process of instruction and play is called *Love* (see Figure 3). This painting was my first of 2020. It was through the process of teaching my daughters how to use artmaking to memorialize something beautiful shared with our family in remembrance of loved ones that I started to create again. As O'Reilly claims "We attended to often to what women need from 'mothers' and mentors'; attend too little perhaps to what we who are old need from 'daughters' who create and preserve what we care for and care about, whose energy and sheer determination carry us on" (*Rocking* 5-6). It was my daughter's creative energy that gave me a glimpse to the other side of grief.



Figure 2. *Still Life Lesson*, March 2020



Figure 3. *Love*, March 2020, 40 x 30, Mixed Media on Canvas Gallery Wrap

After teaching my college level courses online and attempting to teach my daughters' their curriculum, we continued to play with artmaking in our shared making space (see Figure 4). When I would paint, they would paint (See Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 4. *Shared Making Space*, March 2020



Figure 5. *Maribelle [3] Painting in Shared Studio Space*, March 2020



Figure 6. Hazel Anne [6] *Painting in Shared Studio Space*, March 2020

We also collaboratively painted. It was these shared moments that became spaces where we helped one another to work through the tantrums and stress that come with living, learning, and working from home fulltime together. We call these works *Meditative Tantrums*, as there were many over this time period (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. *Meditative Tantrums*, Collaboratively Painted, March 2020

I continued to use the kitchen table to instruct my daughters in unique ways of making art, such as playing with printmaking (see Figure 8). Together, we enjoyed making art, but each day, this would only last an hour or so, and then they wanted to play outside. Since the table was already set up, I started to paint there so I could keep an eye on them through the kitchen window (see Figure 9).



Figure 8. *Playing with Printmaking*, March 2020



Figure 9. *Kitchen Table Studio*, March 2020

As the weather in our area continued to grow into a beautiful spring I started to paint on our back-deck. This way I could keep painting while also keeping an eye on the kids (see Figure 10). I absolutely loved the process of painting outside, but not the process of having to clean up for every meal (see Figure 11).



Figure 10. *Making and Mothering*, March 2020



Figure 11. *Studio and Meal Table*, March 2020

In a matter of a week, I had moved my studio from upstairs in the playroom to the kitchen table, and then the back-deck table, allowing me to paint each afternoon. I wanted to sustain this practice but in a way that would not require

me to break it down each time the family gathered for a meal. Therefore, I moved my studio into the driveway (see Figure 12). I thought this would be a great space, and it worked for a while, until the girls started to think of the space as their personal playground, perfect for hide and seek and playing soccer (see Figure 13).



Figure 12. *Driveway Studio*, April 2020



Figure 13. *Studio and Playground*, April 2020

Working in the driveway worked for a few days, but I tired of having to take everything in each night, and the tree branches above kept dropping on my work. Therefore, I moved my car into the driveway and created a sanctuary to paint in (see Figure 14) while continuing to watch my children run around, catch insects, and escape the snakes (see Figure 15).



Figure 14. *Garage Studio Sanctuary*, April 2020



Figure 15. *A Mother's Studio View*, April 2020

I started painting (see Figure 16) and painting (see Figure 17) and painting every single day (see Figure 18). This series of abstract paintings is called *Colour Tribulations*, as playing with colour (see Figure 19) helped me fight off the anxiety, troubles, difficulties, and constant uncertainty of living in a pandemic. Each painting represents my attempt to find peace as well as a sense of safety and a calm in the middle of COVID-19 chaos (see Figure 20).

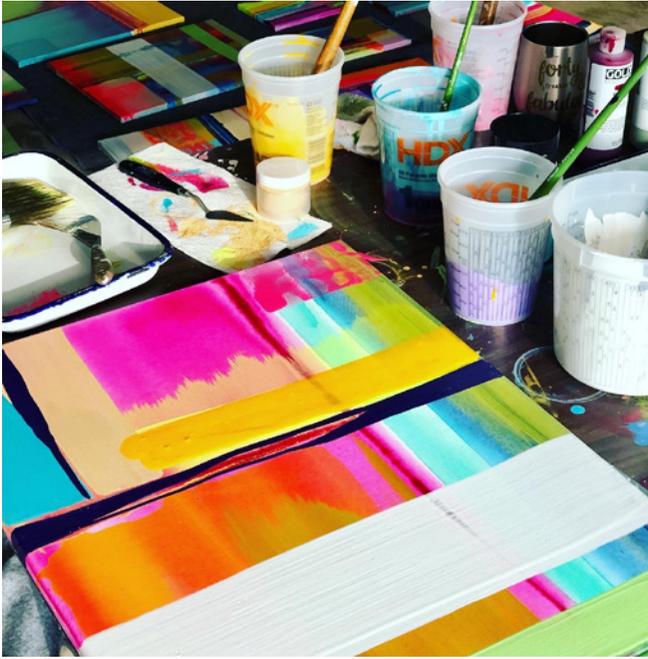


Figure 16. *Playing with Paint*, April 2020



Figure 17. *Painting Every Day*, April 2020

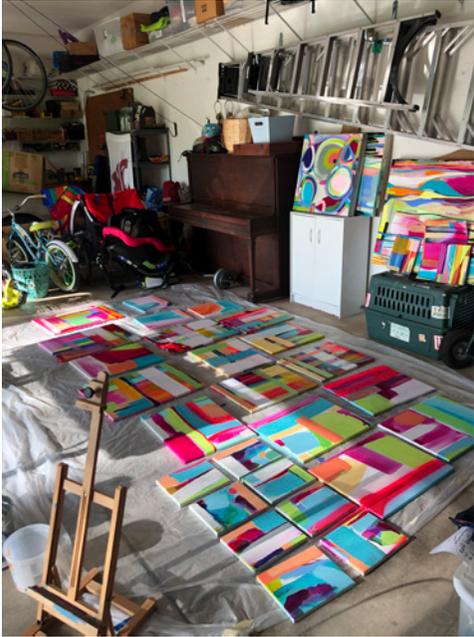


Figure 18. *Painting Each and Every Day*, April 2020

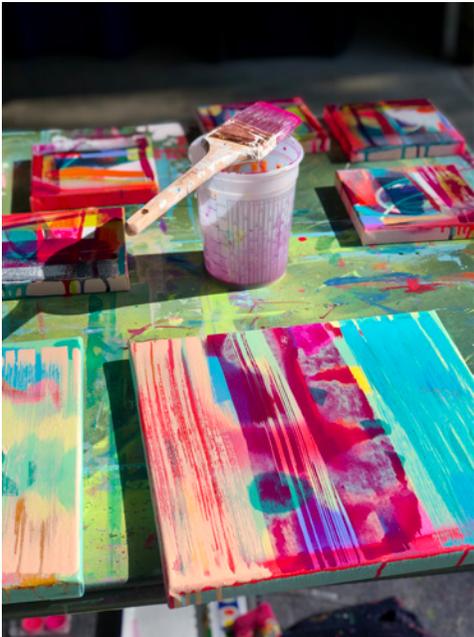


Figure 19. *Playing with Colour*, April 2020



Figure 20. *A Mothers Making Space*, April 2020

The paintings, around one hundred by the end of April (see Figure 21), conceptually work through the multitude of stresses and anxieties that accompany mothering and teaching in the midst of a pandemic and transform them into meditation, colour, and forms of art therapy. It was through the process of painting and playing with colours every day that my fog of ever consuming grief, depression, and anxiety started to lift.

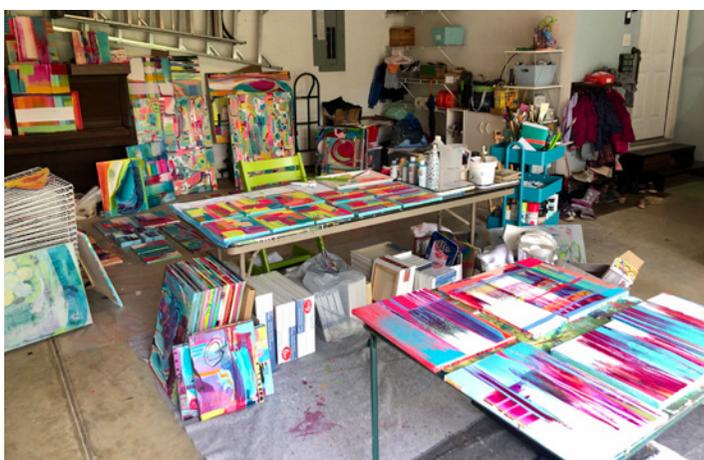


Figure 21. *One Hundred and Counting*, April 2020

## Colour Therapy

The COVID19 pandemic has caused tribulations across the world, but the one thing it has provided me, which I had not had since becoming a Mothering-ArtAdemic, is extended time to play with artmaking. With my new garage studio, I was not concerned with damaging the floors or making a mess of our family table. This new artmaking space provided me the freedom to experiment with colour therapy.



Figure 22. *Experimenting with Colour Therapy*, April 2020

Merriam-Webster defines “colour therapy” as “the use of color and colored lights to improve or enhance physical or emotional well-being.” Using different media and containers, I mixed colours as if they were elixirs of happiness (see Figure 22). It has been said that the purest and most thoughtful minds are those which love colour the most (Birch). Many artists are taught and continue to create with a limited palate. They create boundaries in their paintings, selecting only the colours that coordinate or complement one another. In contrast, I agree with the artist David Hockney in his defense of olive green, in that I don’t believe that there are “off-putting” colours (St. Clair 11). I do not want my works to be defined with a limited palette using only warm, cool, or neutral colours. As I was experiencing a range of emotions, I chose to use the whole spectrum of a rainbow to express what words could not in my works (see Figure 23). I looked to colour as a source of healing. As grief and the fear of the unknown are hard to define, “It is the best possible sign of a colour when nobody who sees it knows what to call it” (Ruskin qtd. in St. Clair, 32).

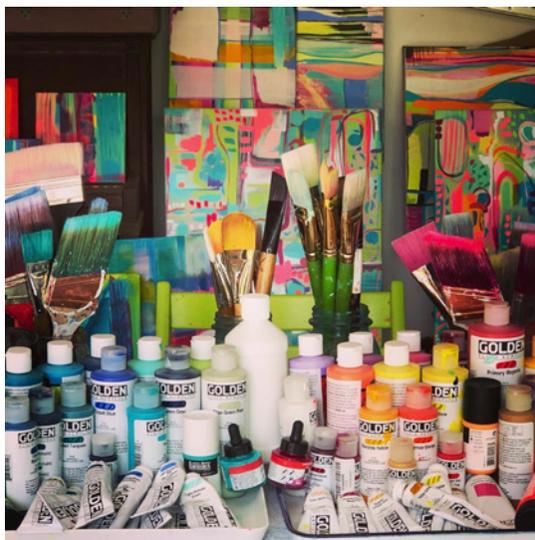


Figure 23. *Using the Spectrum of a Rainbow*, April 2020

I used Payne's grey—a bluish blur of fading black, the colour of a pigeon's feathers, or the cool cozy feeling of a dark, overcast rainy day. Payne's grey is my colour of grief and deep sorrow for the loss of loved ones. Artists look to Payne's Grey to create an atmospheric perspective in their compositions. In my recent paintings, this colour represents the memories of my loved ones, almost like a fading dream; the further away they are, the paler and bluer they appear. I used a spectrum of pinks: quinacridone magenta, quinacridone violet, quinacridone crimson, and florescent pink. A lighter shade of red, pink holds power in its hue. Looking at a shade of pink brings me happiness, and wearing it makes me feel powerful. Originally used to define a baby's sex as male, as it was the Virgin Mary that wore baby blue, pink in its contemporary form is associated with femininity (St. Clair). I find power in strong vibrant pinks, as I do not ascribe to the feminist backlash against the colour (see Figure 24).

I played with pyrrole orange for its shock, yellow ochre and nickel azo yellow for its warmth, and many hues, shades, and tints of blue and green for their connections to water and earth, including teal, cerulean blue, cobalt blue, cobalt turquoise, turquoise phthalo, chromium oxide green, green gold, phthalo green (blue shade), and phthalo green (yellow shade) (see Figure 25). Large strokes of cleansing white, with its link to light, have "laid deep roots in the human psyche and, like anything divine, can simultaneously inspire awe and instill terror in the human heart" (St. Clair 39).

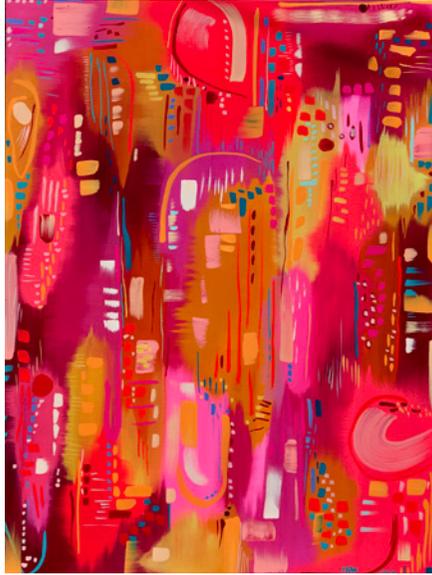


Figure 24. *One of A Kind*, April 2020, 60 x 40, Mixed Media on Gallery Wrap Canvas



Figure 25. *Colour Tribulations 1-6*, April 2020, Mixed Media, each 10 x 8 on Canvas Wrap

Days turned into a week, and weeks into months, and I continue to paint almost every day while still living through a pandemic. As I mix my colour concoctions, I find healing qualities in my colour potions and strength and peace as I lay colours on the canvas one at a time (see Figure 26).



Figure 26. *Side by Side: A Dance for Daniel & A Dance for Nonnie*, April 2020, each 30 x 30, Mixed Media on Gallery Wrap Canvas

Working through this creative process of building colours upon colours as well as the sheer multitude of paintings (see Figure 27) has provided a space for healing and a place where I can truly embody my Mothering-ArtAdemic identity. I continue to collaboratively paint with each of my daughters (see Figures 28 and 29). This process of making together has provided them space to creatively engage with colour therapy, and together, we have produced works we are proud of (see Figures 28, 30, and 31).



Figure 27. *Multitude of Paintings*, May 2020



Figure 28. *Mom, I See a Rainbow*, April 2020



Figure 29. *Maribelle, Collaborative Painting*, July 2020

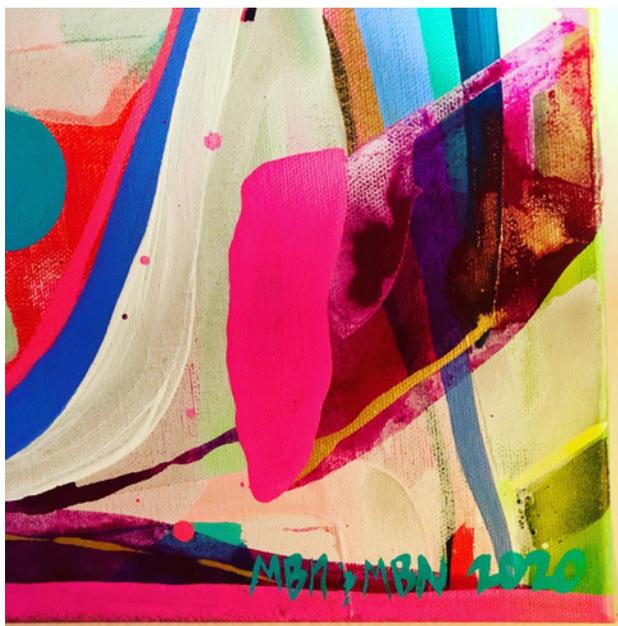


Figure 30. *MBN and MBN Collaborative Painting*, July 2020, 36 x 36, Mixed Media on Gallery Wrap Canvas

Figure 31. *Close Up of Collaborative Painting*, July 2020

## Conclusion

Grief has no conclusion (Shear; Maciejewski and Prigerson), and as I write this, the conclusion to COVID-19 is nowhere in sight (ILO). The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inequalities of gender equality in our current society like no other time in history (Mahajan et al.). Mothers are leaving the workplace in higher numbers than ever before to prioritize childcare and homeschooling demands (Kibbe). The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated mental health conditions in America with “daily doses of death, isolation and fear generating widespread psychological trauma” (Wan 1). I continue to grieve for my Nonnie and Uncle Daniel, along with three other friends lost this year, and now the heavy weight of losing Ruth Bader Ginsburg. As an American and feminist parent (Comerford, Jackson, and Kosior), I am deeply concerned with the direction my nation is headed in. I constantly worry about what kind of future my daughters will come of age in and what I can do to protect their human rights as females.

I come from a platform of unearned privilege as a white cisgender woman with inherited monetary and social knowledge. I am in heterosexual relationship, married to a supportive partner. Our dual incomes have provided a stable home environment in these uncertain times. Our harmonious relationship and collaborative parenting style work to create a safe space for our family to thrive together. Together, we made the choice to pull our oldest daughter out of the public-school system to send both of our children to a private Montessori school. Though financially draining, I recognize how fortunate we are to have made this privileged decision. Enrolling both our children in the same private school limits our exposure to COVID-19 and provides a consistent in-person education for our daughters while allowing us both to fully focus on our careers. I started this academic year with a promotion to program director of fine arts at my university and am currently teaching in a high-stress HyFlex model (“Returning to Learn”). According to the United States Department of Labor, 865,000 women across many industries left the workforce between August and September of 2020, in what is now being called a “female-recession” to recognize the detrimental and disproportional effect the pandemic has had on women in the workplace (Berry). This statistic is deeply concerning for society. I recognize how my privileged position in life has afforded me the opportunity to constructively take advantage of COVID-19 by using creativity to enhance my relationship with myself and my family.

Even though there is currently no vaccine for COVID-19 and positive numbers are on the rise, we no longer are required to stay at home as a family full time. I continue to mother, teach, and paint while living in a pandemic. My depression has lifted, but my grief and anxiety are ever constant in our current social climate. As I pass through my mothering-making space each

day, as I am not currently able to play with colour for hours, I continue to find short bursts of time to experience colour therapy (see Figure 32). The process of painting continues to bring me a sense of safety and calm in the middle of COVID-19 chaos.

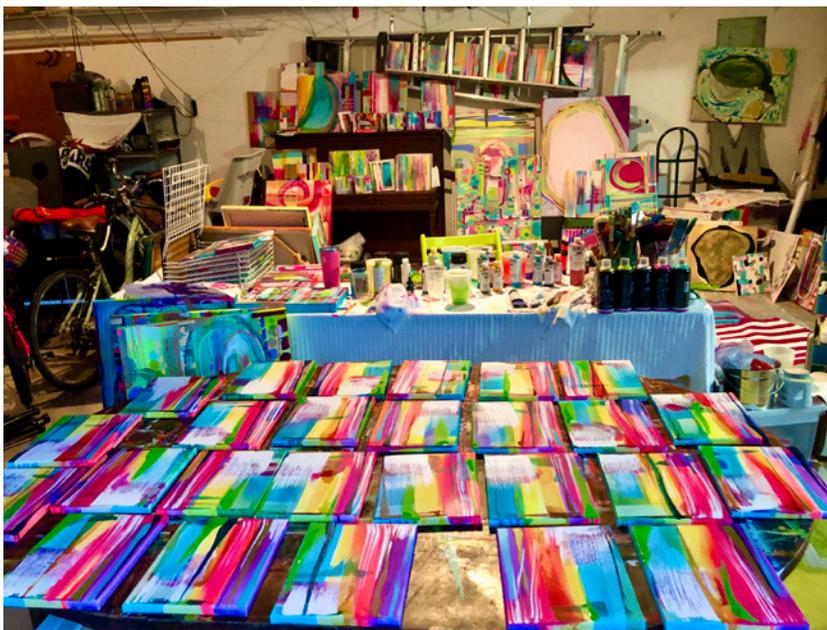


Figure 32. *Studio Accumulation, Three Hundred and Counting*, October 2020

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## The Poetry of the Pandemic

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*This autoethnographic essay is a co-constructed endeavour that documents how we—a MotherScholar and a Black Woman scholar—both used poetic inquiry as feminist methodology (Faulkner) in order to respond to and find reprieve from the emotional gamut we each experienced during COVID-19. Though not professional poets, we value the craft of poetry and found it most suitable to capture the emotional labour of performing our caregiving responsibilities as mother and grandmother in our respective home spaces while trying to maintain our (virtual) workloads in institutes of higher education. Poetry was an opportunity for us to make sense of our changing identities and unpredictable emotions while being constantly bombarded with experiences and roles we never asked for or ever anticipated confronting—at home or work.*

*The poems vary in content and form in an attempt to capture the diversity of experiences we each encountered while attempting to weather the same storm but in different boats. Collectively, the poems speak to the competing messages of comfort and confusion we each received during this volatile and traumatic time. By sharing our lived experiences, we invite others to bear witness to our COVID-19 realities of being forced to care for everyone and everything while still trying to care for ourselves, and we hope that readers find solace in a shared story, adopt this self-inquiry method as a form of self-care, and/or are prompted to check on any and all of the mothers that are just trying to survive COVID-19.*

*When home becomes your office*

*When work invades your kitchen*

*When you teach other people's children while your own children sleep twenty feet away*

*When online #crisisschooling is forcing you to choose between teaching your daughter math or being a good mom*

*When the incessant, unmistakable ding of emails demanding accountability for your time, your whereabouts, your productivity bombards your screen—*

What are you doing?! Show me! Count it up.

Tally it.

Tally it again in a different format.

Tally due today!

New tally in a different format for a different reason due tomorrow!!

Convince me you are doing your job!!!

Your care for your children better not be getting in your way!

*—while you try to focus on the comforting hum of students learning from you online in another open tab*

*When COVID-19 forces a nation to observe a stay-at-home order, when can a MotherScholar find her own space among the unsolicited, unreasonable, and unimaginable expectation to become all things, to all people, at all times*

*When the pandemic tries to tell you that you CAN'T be a mother **and** a scholar in the same space, at the same time*

*When?!*

*Perhaps...*

*...in the stolen moments between feeding children and contributing in Zoom meetings,*

*...in the margins of a work journal borrowed from her children's bag of returned school supplies,*

*Perhaps ...*

*...in the form of a poem. (Burrow)*

## **Introduction**

This autoethnographic, arts-based article of original poems and photographs shares how we—Lauren, a MotherScholar and Tonya, a Black Woman scholar—used poetic inquiry as feminist methodology (Faulkner) to make parallel spaces to both respond to and find reprieve from the emotional gamut we each experienced as a result of COVID-19 (and 2020 in general). Although we are not professional poets, we value the craft of poetry and find it most suitable to “provide insight and critical perspective” (McCulliss 83) to capture the emotional labour of performing both professional and caregiving responsibilities during a global pandemic. For Lauren, that labour included being a mother of three elementary school-aged children in the same space and at the same time, as she was expected to maintain her faculty workload of teaching, service, and scholarship in a college of education. For Tonya, that labour turned into tackling her responsibilities as a university administrator from home, caring for and assisting in the homeschooling of her granddaughter, and creating an in-garage quarantine space for her husband—an essential

worker. We turned to poetry to help us work through and attempt to make sense of these new and redefined identities that resulted from and were in response to huge, unexpected shifts in our professional and personal lives during the global pandemic, a heightened national awareness of civil rights inequities, as well as other 2020 events demanding we fill roles no mother ever expected to fill.

The poetic inquiry presented in this article facilitated our exploratory reflection on our emotions resulting from the experiences brought about by COVID-19. Our poems address our perception of who and what harmed or helped our occasional attempts to thrive rather than just merely survive during COVID-19 and the rest of 2020. The poems are inspired by and seek to acknowledge the voices of the many people and events that found or forced their way into our “home-work” spaces—including employers, female social groups, students, social media, civil unrest, and family members. Collectively, the poems speak to the competing messages of comfort and confusion received during these ongoing volatile and traumatic times. By sharing our lived experiences in poetic form, we hope others will be able to connect with and learn from our COVID-19 reality; simultaneously, we hope that positioning our methodology as a potential self-care practice will help other mothers who are being forced to care for many others while still trying to care for themselves.

“I’m an artist who makes constant mistakes” (Outspoken Bean).

## 2. The Poets

Identity work is the dynamic, ongoing construction, and reconstruction of one’s identity. For this research essay, we acknowledge intersections of a variety of salient identities that informed, guided, and embodied our poetry. Essential to the understanding of our poetic process and meaningful interaction with our poems is awareness about the poets and our positionality during COVID-19.

### *Dr. Lauren E. Burrow*

I am a tenured associate professor of elementary education in my sixth year at my current institute of higher education. I am a white, cisgender female, married with three children. I claim an identity of MotherScholar—an identity presented with the intentional formatting of a single word featuring the capitalization of both “mother” and “scholar.” Throughout this essay, I will revert to the formatting choices of others (e.g., Matias; Lapayese) when referencing their scholarship on mother-scholarhood, but when speaking about my experiences, I will use “MotherScholar” to remind myself and others that I am both forced to and willingly embrace a reality in which my two deeply important identities manifest as a blended coexistence that is always

flowing throughout both my personal and professional times and spaces (Burrow et al.). Prior to COVID-19, I had explored with other coauthors how claiming a MotherScholar identity meant that I had accepted that I am always “mom” and always “scholar” and had erased the guilt associated with trying to balance these two identities; instead, I chose to acknowledge and celebrate how each mentored, inspired, and improved the other (Burrow et al.). But during these pandemic times, I felt my “mother” and “scholar” side fighting each other, vying and pushing me to accept “mother-scholar”—a hyphen I had tried to reject. But ironically—in my own home—my mother-self constantly felt it was being told to “find another space,” “carve out time later,” and “seek out moments somewhere else.”

As national awareness about COVID-19 grew, my family and I were completing spring break. Although the Texas governor did not issue a shelter-in-place/stay-at-home order, my children’s schools and my university did not resume in-person classes after spring break. (The governor eventually declared all Texas schools closed for the remainder of the school year.) So, school resumed for my eleven-year-old daughter and ten- and eight-year-old sons through an online platform facilitated by their teachers. Before spring break was over, my face-to-face courses in a cotaught, community-based teacher education program had to be rapidly transformed into online offerings for two weeks, which eventually became reality through the end of the semester. My husband was able to pause his contract home-repair work and did not return to work outside the home until summer. I continued online teaching throughout the summer and took courses in a master’s program I had elected to enter into through a benefits program started by my university in early spring. In August, my department chair made the decision that all fall courses would be offered online. I currently teach three courses online; all three of my children attend two different schools online, and my husband has resumed work outside of the home.

### *Dr. Tonya D. Jeffery*

I am a new, tenure-track assistant professor of science education. I am starting my fourteenth year in the field of education. I began my teaching career in K-12 as a middle-school science teacher, then as a university professor, and, most recently as a university administrator. I am a Black, cisgender female, married with one son, and we have one adorable granddaughter. My husband and I are empty nesters; however, our friends tend to counter this claim as our granddaughter spends most weekends at our home—and we love it! When COVID-19 became a global pandemic, my husband and I had recently taken a cruise to celebrate my birthday, and my university was currently on spring break. As Lauren shared, the Texas governor did not immediately issue a stay-at-home order. However, out of an abundance of caution, Houston’s mayor did

issue such an order. Therefore, all schools and my university did not resume in-person classes after spring break; the governor did eventually declare all of the state's schools to remain closed for the remainder of the academic school year. In addition, most daycare facilities, YMCAs, and other childcare organizations also closed. Fortunately, because I was now working from home, and for the safety of our granddaughter, she stayed with me during the day while her parents worked.



My granddaughter working at her desk while I worked at our kitchen table.

So, learning for my granddaughter resumed through the homeschooling facilitated by her parents and me. My husband was considered an essential employee, so he continued to work daily in the field. He and I created a quarantine space in our garage to mitigate and prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 and prayed his daily work in the field would not jeopardize our health and livelihood. As a university administrator of a revenue-generating centre, my challenge was to transfer all of our current programming from a face-to-face format to online platforms and to transfer upcoming professional development and certification prep workshops for both in-service and pre-service teachers to an online platform for the remainder of the spring semester and throughout the summer. Meetings continued via Zoom. Lots of meetings occurred each week. My granddaughter was a regular attendee at most meetings, unless she was napping. This became our new normal—my new normal workday and her new normal pre-K school day. She worked at her desk while I worked at my desk, kitchen table, or dining room table. I would take

breaks often to play with my granddaughter, assist her with a puzzle, read a book to her, or cook her breakfast or lunch.



My granddaughter completing a puzzle and keeping me company while I worked at our dining table. Every fifteen minutes or so she would ask, “Nana, are you done?”

The pandemic created a pause in my life, which allowed me to reflect on and thoughtfully determine what matters most in life. So, I began prioritizing my purpose, reexamining my values, and assessing how my current role aligned with these values. It was during this time that I decided to take the opportunity to pivot and pursue my passion of teaching once again. I submitted numerous applications and am so grateful I was able to secure my dream role here at my current university. I am currently teaching three courses online; my husband is still working in the field, and our granddaughter is being fully homeschooled by her parents. During this time, my identity as a Black Woman and as a scholar became explicitly intersected with my roles and identities of being both a mother and grandmother or a Black MotherScholar and a Black GrandmotherScholar.

*Poetry is the “heart thing I do for myself” (Brown and Jacobs).*

### 3. Why Poetry?

Debbie McCullis claims that we are all surrounded by poetry—every day, everywhere—and that we are drawn to poems for the joy, meanings, and memories they bring to our lives because “they have the ability to reveal the truth of our lives more passionately than the overlying narrative” (109). As mothers, we recognize our natural embrace of poetry has been found throughout our personal lives—recited as soothing bedtime nursery rhymes to our children when they were young, chanted in the streets as powerful anthems at Black Lives Matter protests, or sung aloud with our adolescents as we drive to anywhere. As scholars, we followed Liza Hayes Percer’s encouragement to lean into our natural tendency towards poetic verse to help us make sense of these senseless time, to present our nontraditional narratives through nontraditional research practice, and to better document, for others, the beautiful complexity of our lives in a way that only poetry can capture.

*“I love the deep attribute of poetry to pause, to look, to listen, to respect, to pay attention to variety and learn something new.” (Nye)*

### 4. Poetry as Methodology and Project

Our choice of poetic inquiry within our autoethnographic article served as both research method and research project (Faulkner, “Poetic Inquiry” 210). We engaged in our poetic journeys along common yet distinct lived experiences occurring in parallel spaces during COVID-19 times. The arts, in essence, helped each of us to prioritize the valuing of our personal experiences (Adams and Hermann 2) during a complex, confusing time. Like Brearley, we recognize the use of poetry, a creative-arts technique, as a research practice that allowed us to explore, represent, and reflect “richness and complexity of data and invite new and multiple levels of engagement that are both cognitive and emotional.” McCullis elaborates the following: “Poems can be gathered from specific groups to describe ethnographic data. They can be used as an interview tool, written by participants as answers to questions or they can be the subject of study” (88). For us, we were able to use the poetic process as a self-interrogation tool and the resulting poetry became our answers to all the questions being asked of us—by ourselves, our workplaces, our children, and society.

Thinking poetically about the research inquiry process helped us to collect the most relevant themes and phrases out of the storm of emotions swirling within and around us (Prendergast) during COVID-19. As an “experimental text form,” poetry granted us the cathartic opportunity to analyze, reconstruct, and confirm our lived experiences while empowering us to report our qualitative essay in a nontraditional format (Carr 1330). We recognize and

accept that “poetry is not generalizable in the statistical sense of the world, but generalizable in that it helps stimulate an empathetic understanding in the reader” (Gallarardo et al. 291). During a global pandemic, during tragically harmful civil unrest throughout our nation, and during nontraditional work-life times, a nontraditional methodology and reporting style was essential to ensuring that we—as Mother/GrandmotherScholars already overburdened by traditional scholarly demands and daunted by traditional scholarship expectations—could publish our study on our own terms and in a format well-suited to present our multifaceted stories.

### *Poetry as Feminist Methodology*

As self-identified Women in academia, we actively and intentionally choose to overlay a feminist lens through which we inherently and intentionally approach our professional-personal lives and labour. Sandra Harding identifies three characteristics of feminist research: (1) generating problems “from the perspectives of women’s experiences”; (2) motivating scholarship for females so as to provide them with explanations they actually “want and need”; and (3) locating “the researcher in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter” (7-8). Firmly rooted in feminism, our scholarship was “conducted at the margins of traditional disciplines” (Hesse-Biber, Nagy, and Leavy 5) and in celebration of the power and potential of poetry. We join Sandra Faulkner in seeing “poetic inquiry and feminist poetry [as] examples of how we can engage in embodied inquiry to emphasize the importance of storytelling and narrative in the representation of knowledge and everyday experience” (“Crank Up the Feminism” 5). Our continued commitment to storytelling takes on a higher purpose when chosen as the vehicle by which to disseminate our research in that it honors our deeply personal Mother/GrandmotherScholar voices in what is typically patriarchal spaces (i.e., preferred and valued research methodology and dissemination in traditional formats).

### **Poetry as MotherScholar Methodology**

Among other identities, we identify as Grandmother/MotherScholars. First coined by Matias and further explored by Lapayese, “mother-scholars drive the feminist impulse to dismantle patriarchal binaries—namely, the sharp divide between the intellect and the maternal, the public and the private” (17); they also find “creative ways to insert [the] maternal identity, specifically in academic spaces and [into] scholarship” (23). For us, incorporating the arts afforded us that creative opportunity to effectively insert our maternal selves throughout the collection and presentation of our personal thoughts in our professional work. Specifically, poetic inquiry facilitated research that “lay[s] naked the taken-for-granted assumptions and social structures and stretch[es]

the binaries with a focus on personal family intimacies ... [collapsing] the false divide between ... public and private” (Faulkner, “Crank up the Feminism” 16). The final proclamation of our Mother/GrandmotherScholar identity is pictured throughout this article in the home-life photography—candid and staged for artistic purposes—which we included alongside our poetry as an arts-based research tool to “capture the wholeness and complexity of the human experience and create empathetic reactions in others” (McCullis 95).

*“I think of myself as a living poem”* (Outspoken Bean).

## The Poems

In the next sections, we present our poetry. Our poems are, by no means, able to capture the totality of our pandemic time; instead, they act as snapshots, time capsules crafted to hint at the sweeping panorama of emotions we experienced as our relationships with colleagues, family, our own scholarship, and even society changed during COVID-19. Our poems hope to effectively evoke the extremely taxing emotional and mental labour of performing caregiving responsibilities (including the unexpected role of facilitating emergency remote learning for our children or grandchild) while managing the constantly changing professional requirements demanded of us by our open-for-business-but-physically-closed campus workplaces—all during the unnerving uncertainty of a global pandemic and other 2020 events. The writing of our poetry was a cathartic gift to ourselves, and the presented poems are our gift to readers with the two-prong goal of both inviting readers to connect with our lived experiences and acting as a model of potential self-care practice for other mothers in academia.

### Surge Capacity, Part I (Burrow)

*Inspired by a poetic prompt from Naomi Shihab Nye and informed by an article by Tara Haelle.*



My youngest son and I baking sugar cookies together.

When COVID-19 first hit, it felt like summer camp. We reconnected with family we barely knew. We traded our work clothes for jeans, stretchy pants, fuzzy socks, comfy tees, and sometimes it was event pants optional. We laughed. We stayed up late and turned off all the alarm clocks. We had an abundance of “let’s...”

Let’s bake a cake

Let’s stay up late and sleep in later

Let’s go for evening walks

Let’s order wine

Let’s save our money by cooking at home and cancelling our travel

Let’s count our blessings

Let’s forget our Keto diets and enjoy some chocolate

Let’s watch movies together

Let’s Skype the grandparents

Let’s play games late into the night

Let’s host virtual slumber parties with friends we miss

Let’s raise two poodle puppies

Let’s go for a drive

Let’s go to school in our pajamas

Let’s attend anti-bias antiracist webinars with @britthawthorne and @amplifyRJ

Let’s do science experiments—outdoors, on our nature walks, whenever the mood strikes

Let’s go on virtual trips around the world

Let’s be thankful for the emotional bandwidth to stay flexible and not feel too overwhelmed

Let’s prioritize self-care

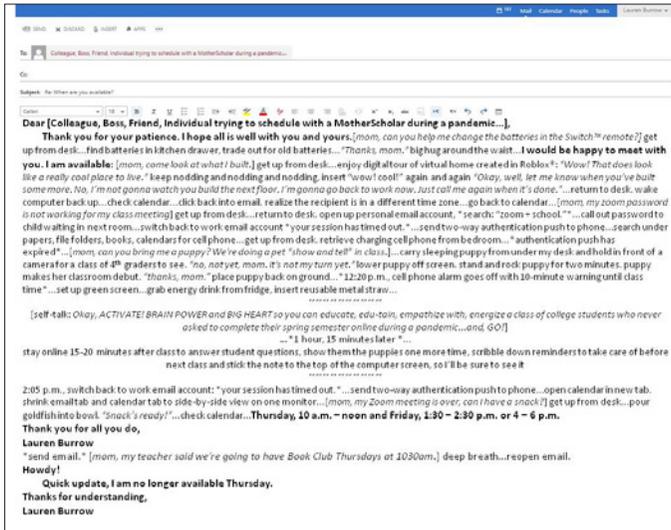
Let’s dye our hair pink and purple and blue

Let’s follow along and paint with artists like @jarrett\_lerner and @cassie\_stephenz

Let’s do stuff

... together.

## Re: When Are You Available? The Long Process of Composing an Email during a Pandemic, Start Time: 11:45 a.m. (Burrow)



A mock email and an accounting of all the things that sometimes down occurred as I tried to compose a greeting, three lines, and a salutation.

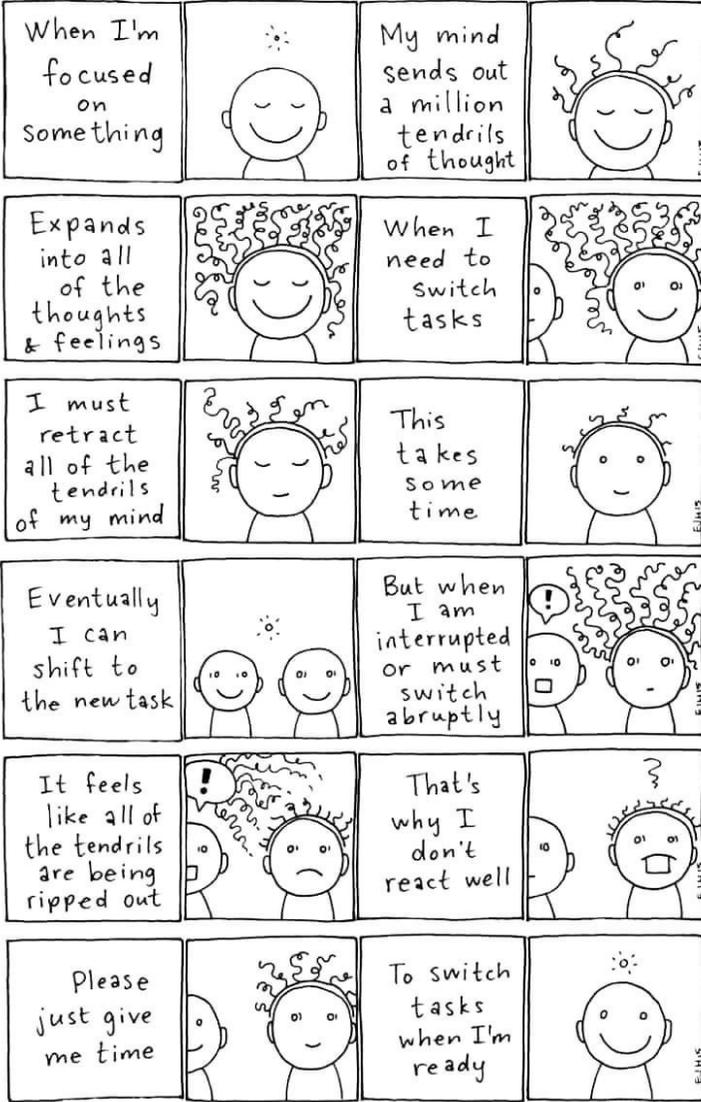


A visualization of the poem painted by my youngest son. He shows my path around the house as I move from my computer (top right) to helping him with online pandemic schoolwork (bottom right) to making lunch for his sister (bottom left) and back up to my green screen (top left) for a Zoom meeting. He titled the artwork: "At Once," because he says I do ALL these things "all at once."

### How Can Words So Sweet Cause So Much Stress? (Burrow)

*Inspired by a comic by Erin Human, with respect to the unique experiences of the autistic community.*

## Why it's hard to switch tasks (Let's call it Tendril Theory)



Comic strip created by Erin Human.

Mom  
Mom  
Mom  
Mom  
Mom

Will you come watch TV with me?

Mom  
Mom  
Mom

Can I say “hi” to your students?

Mom  
Mom  
Mom  
Mom  
Mom  
Mom  
Mom

Can we make sugar cookies together?

Mom  
Mom

Look what I can do...

Mom  
Mom  
Mom  
Mom  
Mom  
Mom

Come eat. I made *you* a lunch.

Mom  
Mom

Do you want to play with me?

Mom  
Mom

**I care. I really do.  
But I can't do this right now.  
I just don't have time to talk to you.**

Mom  
Mom  
Mom

**WHAT?!**

I love you

### **Haikus: A Series of Interruptions by the Children I Love** (Burrow)

Although most interruptions felt like month-long requests for my divided attention, these were so often compounded by the many, tiny, constant and moments punctuating and interrupting my work from home efforts during these pandemic times.

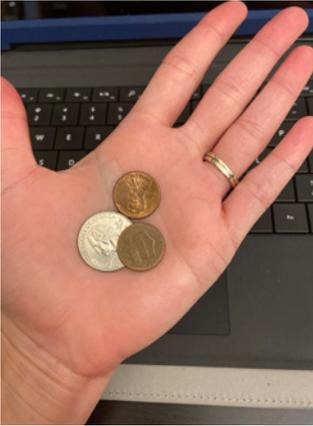
These haikus capture both the dialogue expressed during and the discombobulating disruption felt as a result of these brief interruptions/moments encountered at my home-work desk. Some were spoken aloud, some were whispered in my ear, and some were scrawled on a scrap piece of paper and slipped onto my keyboard.

These are just a few of the many, many small ideas expressed to me while I was just trying to survive on screen.



The view that my children often see of me as they approach my desk to share something verrrrrry important with me!

*Here, mom, I brought you  
twenty-seven cents because  
you're working so hard.*



A quarter and two pennies. My youngest son's attempt to pay me so I could take a break from my salary-earning work and play with him.

*Do you think magic  
is just science we do not  
yet understand, mom?*

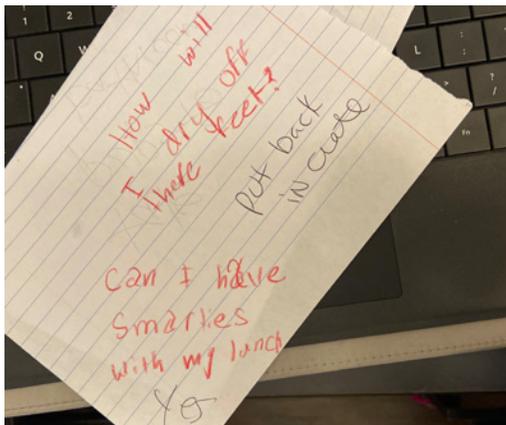


The Lego figurine that inspired my oldest son to muse aloud as I tried to prep for my teacher education course starting in twelve minutes.

*Are you recording?*

*Can I make Ramen—yes/no?*

*Also, the dogs peed.*



Sheet of scrap paper with ongoing notes written to me by my daughter while I was live Zoom teaching.

*I made a Lego*

*Look! She works **in** her home, too.*

*Mom, she's just like you.*



The Lego figurine my youngest son built for me to keep me company while I work. He made sure to include a kitchen, a closet with wardrobe choices, and, of course, a work computer in the middle of her bedroom.

**This Pandemic Survival Was Sponsored By...** (Burrow)

*Inspired by Breckin Meyer's iconic speech as his character, Travis, in the movie Clueless (1995): "Thank you, thank-you. This is so unexpected. I didn't even have a speech prepared... But I would like to say this... tardiness is not something you can do all on your own. Many, many people had to contribute. I'd like to thank my parents for never driving me to school and the L.A. bus drivers for taking a chance on an unknown kid and last, but not least, the wonderful crew at McDonald's for the long hours they spend making Egg McMuffins, without which I might never be tardy. Thank you."*

Orville popcorn, Lunchables, ramen noodles, Eggo waffles, and other snacks  
my kids could make themselves

Oh, popcorn!

I hear your popping slow down, the pauses between pops as the timer  
ticks down

The alarm, while jarring, reassures me that I have another thirty  
minutes before they will

need me again

I find you left as kids scatter off to other rooms

But that where's you come in, *Fortnite*...

The creators of *Fortnite*, *Minecraft*, *Roblox*, and other video games that kept  
my kids occupied

Oh, *Fortnite*!

Headphone-clad children screaming tactical manoeuvres to one  
another from their respective bedrooms and our living room

into the homes of friends, teammates, temporary mission partners

Defeat is epic and results in the tell-tale screams and stomps of  
frustration and tiny human rage

But, the sweet sounds of being awarded a Victory Royale mean it's  
time to rest with the mindless distractions that pandemic brains crave...

Oh, Disney+, *Tiger King*, and all you streaming show services that provided  
entertainment in a click!

Now, there is only the TV hum

A sound I can tune out, a sound I can work to, a sound...

...without which I might never had been ZOOM-ing.

## I Wish My Work E-mails Would Talk to Me Like My Wine Bottles Do (Burrow)

*Who checks on me? Who tells me I am doing a good job?*

*Here's the communication I wish I had read in an email from my bosses; instead, all I have is a found poem comprised of the uplifting words found on the backs of the wine bottles delivered to my doorstep during a pandemic via friends, family, and monthly subscription services joined as of March 2020.*

Dear Lauren,

[You are] someone special; someone who stands out from the flock and follows [her] own path. A unique, original, and out of the ordinary [scholar]. You've got passion and perseverance.<sup>1</sup>

[You are] someone who catches [our] attention.<sup>2</sup>

We are thankful [for] such a good find. [You add] a fun complexity [to your work, elevating it to] an art form [of] craft and creativity, aided by a deep knowledge within a disciplined field.<sup>3</sup>

All those who worked with [you know you are] destined to become a star. You are bright, fresh brimming<sup>4</sup> with a focus on quality.<sup>5</sup>

You are a robust, zippy [scholar who] knows how to hold [her] own.<sup>6</sup> Every bold woman [should] revel in the spotlight ... [and] be recognized.<sup>7</sup>

[So,] we felt [you] deserved [your] own time to shine.<sup>8</sup>

With gratitude, recognition, and support,

*Your Employers In Vino Veritas*



A collection of the corks that said the nicest things to me.

**Stolen Moments** (Burrow)

We get in the car  
 Cheesy bread ordered  
 Chinese food waiting for pick up  
 Bubble tea on speed dial  
 “Okay, what are we listening to?  
 Are we going to pick music to match our mood or make our mood?”  
 Do we need the Taylor that makes us cry? Or do we need up-beat, boppy Taylor?  
 Do we need to scream as bad-ass Women along with Kesha?

We drive down the streets with our only real destination being to pickup to-go meals  
 But the real reason is a chance to get out, to escape, to steal a moment for ourselves ... together.  
 We talk about nothing and everything.  
 We sing along and sit in silence.  
 We ask the big questions and laugh at the little stuff.  
 If the tears hit us, we let them flow.  
 This part was “fine.”  
 This part made us smile.  
 This part made us cry.  
 This part made us want to say a cuss word.  
 This part made us cuss.



My drive-around-town-just-to-get-out-of-our-house buddy.

We cuddle up on the couch  
Splitting a Hershey's chocolate bar  
We watch movies meant to distract us  
Entertain us  
Bond us

“How are you doing, mom?”  
“You sound tired.”  
“You doing okay?”



My let's-share-a-screen-and-check-on-each-other buddy.

### **Surge Capacity, Part II** (Burrow)

*Inspired by a poetic prompt from Naomi Shihab Nye and informed by an article by Tara Haelle.*

As two-weeks turned into two months and two months turned into twenty weeks and twenty weeks turned into... forever, I hit my limit, but the “you have to...” and the “you must...” never stopped coming. So, I cried. A lot. I mourned the loss of the little and the big; I grieved the unknown. We seem to have run out of “let’s...” and it’s feeling more like “less.”

“I’m fine,” just crying

Over empty peanut butter jars  
About files knocked over by those poodle pups  
Because the printer’s out of ink and your online pandemic school  
work is due

I don't even know why!  
while scanning schoolwork for upload  
in front of all to see  
when no one can see me

Just crying because—

Oh, wait a minute! Let me pause for this Zoom meeting

Okay, where was I. Oh, yeah...

*I'm fine.*

It's nothing

It's everything

I'm not fine.

But, mom,

I don't want to stay on Zoom to learn

*I don't want to stay on Zoom to teach*

I want to hang out with you

*I want to hang out with you, too*

I don't know how to do this math

*I don't know how to either*

I can't do this

*I can't either*

When coronavirus is over...

...can my friends come over?

...will everyone be okay?

When...

When.

*When?*

## **A Mother's Prayer for Her Black Son** (Jeffery)

As if this global pandemic that put all of our health to the test  
was not enough,

We also have to withstand the daily social, political, and racial unrest.

Lord Help Us!

### **BLACK LIVES MATTER**

Lord please watch over my son and cover him with your mercy and your grace,  
Protect him and guide him, this is especially needed because of his ethnicity  
and race.

Any shades of black or brown skin just does not seem to have a place,

In this world, even after four hundred years of Black people being enslaved in  
this country, and during these unprecedented times, racism is more elevated...  
what a disgrace!

God, I know that this just isn't right,

But forgive those who do not see our humanity and hate us out of spite.

In your image, we are your creation and we know you love us and will see us  
through despite

All of the disparities, biases, and cruel stereotypes.

### **BLACK LIVES MATTER**

Lord, thank you for all of the extra quality time you have allowed me to spend  
with my one and only son,

But Lord, when he is out in public, walking or driving while Black alone,

Please help him to stay woke, be alert, so he does not become a victim.

Order his steps Lord and guide his path, protect him from all of the racist folk  
and their wrath.

Remind him to please be careful, buckle up, drive the speed limit, and give the  
police no reason to detain him.

Yet, I know because he is Black, all of that doesn't matter, because even when  
one orders their steps, the police will do whatever.

**BUT** if he happens to get stopped by the police for any reason,

Please have him to remember all of the conversations we have had over the  
years and many seasons.

Ever since he was five years old, a young boy preparing for these moments as  
an adult, as a way to control

His anxiety, his nervousness, and to manage his fear,

Of not knowing what the outcome may be, Lord give him the strength to persevere.

Help him to help the police to deescalate the situation with all of your powers that be

And not react when incited or provoked, but remain calm, pray, and think of me.

Lord, please walk with him, talk to him, be intentional and explicit

Because I DO want him to come home and NOT be another hashtag or statistic.

For in this current environment and heated racial climate,

His Black body is considered disposable, underappreciated and lacking in humanity.

I know that I have taught and instilled in him pride, humility, and dignity,

And he is level headed, intelligent, and can articulate his thoughts very clearly.

BUT that doesn't seem to matter, the world is in an unbalanced state right now and crime and violence against Black boys and Black men is rife.

The thought of anything happening to my son fills me with anguish, hurts my heart, and pierces it like a knife,

Everyone in the world knows of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, and that it only takes one moment, one lack of humanity, eight minutes and forty-six seconds, to take a life.

Lord help US... help us all!

Help the world come together like never before to heal and to repair the wrongs of those who've perpetuated racial inequities,

Break down the barriers to systemic and structural oppression and tear down the walls of social injustices.

And Lord, please soften the hearts, the minds and the souls, of those that wish us physical, psychological and emotional injury, are my pleas.

**BLACK LIVES MATTER.**

My *son* matters.

We matter.

*Amen.*

*“Poetry can help us have a window into someone else’s experience or loneliness or difficulty” (Nye).*

## Conclusion

Since March of 2020, we have experienced new responsibilities in our personal lives and nontraditional expectations in our professional lives, yet none of the old responsibilities or traditional expectations of our homes and work have slowed down, been revised, or gone away. The only way we could keep up, the only way we could fulfill traditional scholarship expectations of Mother/GrandmotherScholarhood, was to produce nontraditional scholarship. Poetic inquiry provided us the method, the motivation, and the mattering to tackle the increasingly difficult feat of academic publishing as a mother and grandmother during these pandemic times. It is our hope that all moms can find the time to pause and reflect on the volatile emotions COVID-19 has caused them to endure. It is our hope that all moms have a space to share and be surrounded by social support even while physically distancing. It is our hope that poetry can be that time and space that other moms need to survive 2020. This is our hope, but we also know that some moms may need a lot more right now. Mothers may need their employers to understand their duality, may need their friends to check on them, might need their children's teachers to reach out to them, and may need society to see them because ...

### Not Everyone Can Pause (When Pandemic Poetry Isn't Enough...) (Burrow)

*Informed by an article by the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA).*



Instagram post by Kenya Adjekum Bradshaw (@KenyaBradshaw).

During a pandemic

some people panic (and that's okay)  
 some people *try* to press pause (and that's okay, too)  
 some people pout (you do what you need to do)  
 and some professors publish poetry.

Some moms hold privilege and are surrounded by the support systems necessary to make the time and create the space necessary to process COVID-19, confront 2020, and to survive this new life that they never asked for.

But what about those moms who have to cry in the closet because there is nowhere else to feel all the feels??

who are so lonely because they have to cancel family trips, family gatherings, and weekly lunches with friends,  
 who have a significant other and still feel like they are having to do significantly more than is humanly possible,  
 who never wanted to be a stay-at-home mom,  
 who are "fine"??

What would it look like for all of us to protect those moms who can't rest because their sons are being made into #hashtags by the thin blue line??

What would it feel like to show up those moms who transcend the gender binary, who are unseen, unheard, underappreciated??

What would it sound like to support those moms whose employers expect them to find child care for their children who are attending online #crisis-schooling in their own homes, because a mom's focus shouldn't be distracted by her home life as she connects to the work conference from her living room??

who are furloughed,  
 working more jobs than ever before,  
 unemployed,  
 essential workers??

How can we ease up on those moms who are feeling guilty because their life isn't that bad, but it's still too hard to handle right now?

*Perhaps we can...*

*...join them in protest*

*...demand a change in policy and practice*

*...sit with them, hand them a tissue, show up with cookie dough, and make*

*space for them*

*to pause*

*Perhaps ...*

*...we can publish their poems.*

## Endnotes

1. *True Grit*, Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (2017)
2. *Oveja egra*, Sauvignon Blanc Carmenere Reserva (2019)
3. *Watchful Maker*, Sauvignon Blanc (2018)
4. *Norma Jeane*, Young Merlot (2004)
5. *Duck Pond*, Pinot Gris (2017)
6. *Rancho Campo*, Torrantés (2019)
7. *Embrazen*, Revolutionary Cabernet Sauvignon (MMXVII)
8. *Impress*, Petit Verdot (2017)

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## Pregnancy and Pandemic

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*In this article, I examine through personal narrative my experience as a sculptor, arts educator, and pregnant woman during the COVID-19 crisis paired with comparable stories and anecdotes collected from other pregnant women's experiences during the pandemic. I hope to explore the effects—social, mental, and career related—of being at different stages of pregnancy during this international crisis. Working in a collaborative environment, such as an art studio, I have gained tremendous support over the years from fellow women, some of whom are also mothers, on how to navigate the ins and outs of working in fine arts academia. Now with the current pandemic underway, these resources are still present yet distant, as they virtually manage and maintain their own family units and careers.*

*The 2019–2020 academic year was also my first year in a tenure-track faculty role. I am curious about the effects of COVID-19 and the additional effects of being pregnant in a pandemic. What toll will this crisis take on my career as a young female educator and on my perspective as a new mother? I have gathered information from other pregnant women who are experiencing pregnancy during this crisis and have included their statements in this article. I am interested in perspectives of women both in arts-related careers and outside of the arts as well. Although my voice and experience may be the dominant thread throughout the writing, the unifying theme will be of the resilience of the female mind and body, especially during these dynamic and precarious times of pregnancy and pandemic.*

### **Drive-Thru Heartbeat**

On March 28, 2020, only fifteen days into the safer at home orders issued in Nashville during the coronavirus pandemic, my husband and I pulled into the parking garage of our birth centre for our week twelve prenatal medical appointment. I pointed to the parking spot labelled “patients park here for lab work,” so my husband could park our car. There were other parking spots with

labels including “in labour” and “ultrasound visit.” It is safe to say that back in February when we found out we were pregnant, we were not expecting to be attending a drive-thru doctor’s appointment to hear our baby’s heartbeat for the first time. Two nurses in face masks came out after we texted to indicate our arrival and type of car. The first nurse took my temperature and asked me if I had been experiencing any symptoms related to COVID-19. You could tell she was nervously waiting for me to answer “no,” and an audible sigh of relief was heard from both her and me when I did so. Next, they proceeded to open the passenger side door to take my blood pressure. Then, they tilted my car seat back and applied some aloe vera gel to my stomach. We then listened for the first time to our baby’s heartbeat from the fetal doppler in the front seat of my car. This simultaneously was bizarre and sweet. We were excited for a healthy heartbeat, but the whole time, I could not stop thinking about if I had somehow just exposed myself, my husband, and my baby to this virus just by leaving my house to have this appointment.

In the early days and weeks of the coronavirus pandemic, there was still much uncertainty surrounding how one could be exposed to the virus. We were all living in a constant state of anxiety as the virus ravaged communities across the globe. Now, as I write this article in August 2020, I can say a lot, and simultaneously not much, has changed. Yes, we now know that exposure to COVID-19 can be mitigated with certain strategies—exposure is lowered when outside, wearing a mask helps to prevent transmission, and six feet of social distance does help keep yourself and others safe. However, Since January, there have been over 4.7 million COVID-19 cases and 150,000 deaths in the United States (U.S.). Among the forty-five countries with more than fifty-thousand COVID-19 cases, the U.S. has the eighth-highest number of deaths per 100,000 people: 47.93 deaths from the coronavirus for every one hundred thousand Americans (Craig).

Beyond the numbers, America’s leadership has drawn strong lines in the sand, which has made this pandemic and the strategies in managing it partisan, controversial, and more difficult to implement. Additionally, the series of protests and civil unrest, sparked by the police killing of George Floyd on May 26, 2020, continue to grow as a nationwide movement for racial justice. To say we are living in a tumultuous time is an understatement, but this is not new information to anyone living in the U.S. Unfortunately, the size of our country paired with a “too little, too late” approach to mitigating the virus has got us to where we are now—high infection rates, continued deaths from the virus, and an uncertain future regarding the end of this pandemic.

This article explores the unique perspectives I can offer as a pregnant woman, an educator, and an artist, all of which have been dramatically affected by various aspects of the coronavirus. No one is unaffected or immune to the changes that quarantine and a global pandemic have placed on our lives. I

offer my experiences in these three categories in an attempt to examine how the changing tides of this year have affected and will continue to affect me and women in similar situations.

### **Considering Motherhood as a Young, Emerging Academic**

I teach sculpture at a private university in Nashville, Tennessee, and have just finished my first year as an assistant professor in a tenure-track position as of May 2020. Previous to my academic career, I spent the better part of a decade developing my artwork as a professional artist, participating in international artist residencies, owning a sculpture studio for large-scale commission work, and creating and exhibiting artwork in a variety of forms, including gallery exhibitions, and public art installations. Careers in academia are highly coveted and competitive, and even though I had worked hard towards this goal, I still considered myself lucky to achieve a tenure-track assistant professor role at the age of thirty-two when awarded the position in 2019, immediately upon completing graduate school. Given the considerable effort I made to secure a job in academia over the past ten years, I placed the idea of having children on the backburner until I felt my profession and finances could sustain the decision. However, in November 2018, my healthy, vibrant father died unexpectedly at the age of sixty-one; this event sent shock waves through my immediate family as we all reeled from the loss. As luck would have it, I sought solace in a mentor and mothering academic, who is a supportive female arts educator always open about her experience of having children while seeking tenure in her career. These open conversations about motherhood amid the academic duties of teaching helped to negate my earlier beliefs that I would have to choose one or the other to find success; men do not often face the same decision. The strategy of deciding to not become a mother or hiding the fact that you are is disparaging (Eversole et al). Perhaps, in some ways, I hid this desire to become pregnant from myself, as it lay dormant while I pursued professional goals. However, the loss of such a close family member and mentor as my father, paired with achieving tenure-track employment, allowed me to shift my perspective and reevaluate my timeline for becoming a mother.

The university I work at places high value on teaching and service for evaluating tenure applications. Although the university still considers research important, the institution provides numerous opportunities for development as an educator that can be evaluated for tenure consideration. Jumping into my first year as fulltime faculty, I was eager to engage in these opportunities but struggled to find the right balance to continue to create in my own studio practice. I had been warned that in the first year, I may not make any new artwork and to accept this role shift from an artist to an educator. During this

shift, I reconsidered the prospects of becoming pregnant during this lull in my art practice. By good fortune, I found myself among supportive female colleagues and strong advocates for mothering in academia, who normalized parenting at an early stage in my academic career and fought for each individual's timeline for starting a family to be accepted within our institution. By late 2019, my husband and I had finally committed to the idea of trying to get pregnant, and in late February 2020, we discovered we were pregnant. A week later, Nashville was devastated by a deadly tornado outbreak on the night of March 2, becoming the sixth costliest tornado in American history; it killed twenty-five people, injured 309, and left more than seventy thousand Nashville residents without power (Sutton). Less than two weeks after this catastrophic event, while the city was still recovering from the tornados, the effect of the coronavirus began to sweep across the nation.

The fall semester had been a fairly normal first semester of teaching, not without the pressure and stress of adjusting to my course load of teaching three studio art classes, integrating into a new work atmosphere, and beginning to understand the dynamics of institutional service. However, nothing could have prepared me, or anyone for that matter, for what the spring semester of 2020 would bring. I worked for the first eleven weeks of my pregnancy in our normal in-person, onsite work environment. I taught my 3D Principles of Design and Sculpture II class, with some minor safety modifications, but, in general, the coursework and what I was able to do remained the same. Fortunately, I did not experience much, if any, nausea, morning sickness, or other pregnancy symptoms, which allowed me to carry on as usual. However, on March 11, as COVID-19 struck North America, I went from teaching very hands-on, technical skills to moving my three studio courses to an online format while being twelve weeks pregnant, which left me in a dizzying state. I tried, as many other studio arts professionals around the world did, to quickly reroute my curriculum to be taught remotely. I considered inclusivity aspects of students' access to reliable internet, their ability and space to create three dimensional forms in their new quarantined living arrangements; I also extended a large amount of grace to both them and me as we navigated classes, skill demonstrations, and project critiques over the new Zoom platform. I was not alone in this endeavour: "Many educators have approached dramatically altered spring semesters by embracing such contingent ways of making – without a chop saw, while taking care of children – and in so doing have opened larger conversations about making work without the expected institutional resources" (Dancewicz). Aki Sasamoto, who teaches sculpture at Yale admits that it is important to talk about both the coronavirus and the variety of practices that are possible in times of difficult situations without the institutional resources we are accustomed to (qtd. in Dancewicz). Rather than a skills-based project teaching the basics of welding, our projects shifted to

exploring the human body as a sculptural element, the performative aspects of sculpture, and the use of everyday, found objects as a material in which to develop content.

### **The Pregnant Sculptor**

As Patricia James states in her qualitative study “The Construction of Learning and Teaching in a Sculpture Studio Class,” “the metal shop was a harshly physical world filled with raw and found materials, industrial-sized machines, and brazing equipment. . . . It was a potentially dangerous, visually dense, odor-filled, and noisy place where students cut, pounded, and brazed odd pieces of rusty junk or scrap metal into objects that were transformed into expressive and sometimes funky or surrealistic sculpture” (145). James perfectly paints the scene for any number of typical sculpture studios across the country. As a sculptor, I consider myself a very practical person. You have to be when you are responsible for a studio space filled with dangerous equipment and tools. In my own work, I use pneumatic and electric machinery for stone carving as well as various metalworking tools, such as welders, plasma cutters, and wood shop saws. I am familiar with the physical exhaustion of working long hours with heavy, toxic materials, loud noises, and large-scale artworks.

As a woman in the field of sculpture, I am accustomed to working harder and longer than my male counterparts from sheer lack of physical discrepancies. The role of a female in the often male-dominated field of sculpture has and continues to expand in recent decades thanks to the various waves of the feminist movement and its effect in the workplace. With this flip, more and more women have taken over leadership roles in sculpture-related occupations, both in and out of academia. This is not a new concept as women have been challenging the stereotype of sculpture as a man’s world for decades:

Sculpture was once considered the domain of ambitious male artists, a medium as challenging in its physicality as it was limitless in scope. But for several decades, artists from Eva Hesse and Senga Nengudi to Phyllida Barlow and Ursula von Rydingsvard have carved a place for women working in contemporary sculpture. And in 2018, it’s arguably female artists who are creating some of the most interesting, challenging, and ambitious forms—freely taking the body apart, prodding taboos, and embracing the grotesque. (Thackara)



Figure 1. Casey Schachner directing the install of Stringer, her large-scale, site-specific artwork at Blackfoot Pathways: Sculpture in the Wild (BPSW)



Figure 2. Casey Schachner, Stringer, 2017, BPSW, lodgepole pine, steel, 30' x 17' x 10'

I always knew if and when I ever got pregnant it would be difficult given my chosen artistic field. The particular challenge of maintaining a career in a studio area filled with safety hazards, from the equipment and tools themselves to the dangerous chemicals used, is a unique challenge for a pregnant woman. My job as a sculpture professor and as a visual artist is very physically taxing on the body, even without the addition of growing a human. I was always concerned that having a baby would result in a dramatic pause to my career both as a visual artist and as a sculpture professor because it physically had to be. How am I supposed to demonstrate safe table saw practices with a large pregnant belly out in front of me? How can I keep myself, my students, and my unborn child safe and still do my job? As a female in a sculpture studio, am I going to be replaced by a male who can perform these duties while I am out on maternity leave? These are the concerns I had if and when I became pregnant.

In the article “You Can Be a Mother and Still Be a Successful Artist,” Nikki Maloof, a painter, shares how that there is “an old-fashioned myth that having a baby is going to make it impossible to work,” which is a notion I clearly fear, and I’d reason many professionally-driven women in a variety of industries fear it as well. As one woman notes, “As a career-focused individual with a job that I love, I feared losing a sense of self and motherhood setting me back from all the hard work I had done—especially considering that men still make up more than 85 percent of top leadership roles in the United States” (qtd. in Cashdan). I realize that it was sheer lack of exposure to these conversations about mothering, careers in academia, and the fine arts that led to my fears and doubts. The access to female role models in sculpture has always been motivating, and I find it important now more than ever for young female artists to have access to mothering role models in the arts who are open about their choice into motherhood. As sculptor Tara Donovan states, “While I understand the pressures of the art world all too well, the notion that women must sacrifice the pleasures of motherhood for the sake of a ‘career’ reflects insidious double standards from a bygone era” (qtd. in Cashdan). We are still a generation of female artists recovering from this bygone era of masculinity dominating the artworld, and, in some sense, we must retrain our mindsets to what is possible now.

### Teaching Art in the Time of COVID-19

Beside the changes in our physical environments, syllabi and resources, educators also find ourselves in the role of mentor to students grappling with their own variety of changes and feelings about their experiences with virtual learning. The simple fact that students are struggling to make work in a converted home/art studio environment (assuming they have the space to do so) does not negate the bigger issue that “they aren’t getting what they’ve paid for as consumers of higher education” (Dancewicz). How can a student have a comparable studio experience when creating art without access to materials, tools, and space associated with a university studio? How does working in their apartment or dorm, detached from the community of makers they are used to working with, the tools their tuition privileges them to access, and the space needed to create, effect their sculpture-making? Kyle Dancewicz states that “Art educators are still troubleshooting questions about how to work with students remotely in real time ” and argues that these “profound dilemmas” are being negotiated by educators and students “under immense stress,” which are professional, financial, and health related.”

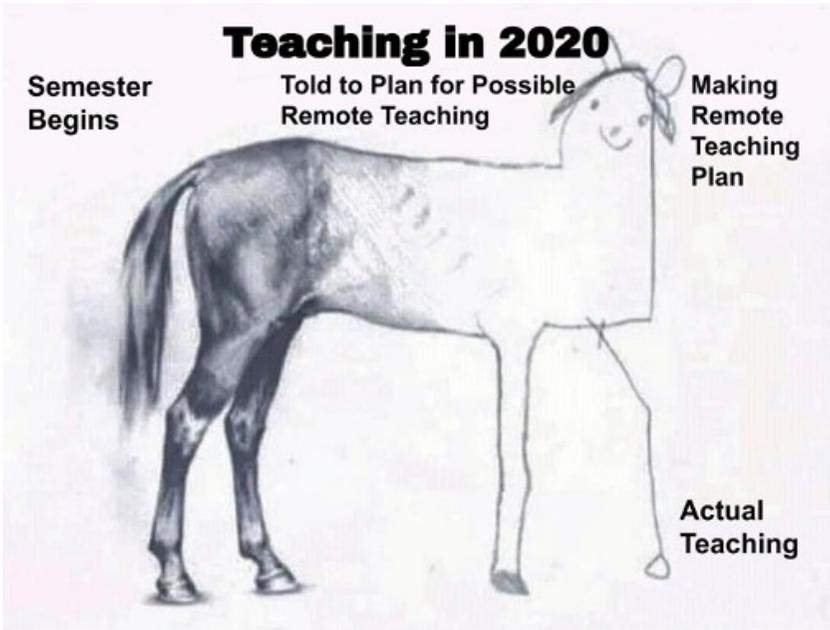


Figure 3. Teaching in 2020 (via Renea Fey), @zachlieberman. Twitter, 14 March 2020, 2:35 pm.

Another reality of teaching remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic is the shift to working remotely and its effects on work-life balance: “We’re at our computers very early because there’s no commute time ... and because no one is going out in the evenings, we’re also always there” (Davis). With a dining room converted into a makeshift office/sculpture studio, I find myself working more hours per day than normal. Establishing boundaries while working from home seems like a vital conversation that is missing from most workplaces, especially the university campus, as we scramble to accommodate the needs of the students. I am grateful for the opportunity to work from home while pregnant and reduce my risk of exposure to the virus; however, I find myself facing higher levels of stress due to trying to stay more focused and on task while discerning when to prioritize pregnancy needs over work needs. The workload and stress will undoubtedly be much higher when the baby arrives, as mothers working in academia, have increasing concerns, challenges, and obstacles. “The glass ceilings, sticky floors, maternal wall, baby penalty and now ... a ‘COVID-bind’” show how women, and especially mothers, are facing more challenges in academia, resulting in fewer submissions to academic journals (Cohenmiller).



Figure 4. Example of Sculpture II work by student Kirsten Agee. Artwork created from home exploring the notion of the body and wearable sculpture



Figure 5. Example of 3D work by student Grace Swing. Artwork created from home exploring assemblage, found object, and accumulation

Over the course of the final weeks of the spring semester, and the abrupt shift to online teaching, I also transitioned from my first to second trimester of pregnancy. As COVID-19 ransacked major urban areas like New York City, my own city of Nashville was trying to grasp how to navigate a large population and to control the spread of this virus. The birth centre my husband and I chose to have our prenatal care made the difficult decision to prevent partners from coming physically to the prenatal appointments; however, partners were allowed to attend virtually. We felt fortunate to have toured the facility before the quarantine took place back in February because it was the first and last time my husband would be able to go into the offices until the arrival of our baby. There certainly was disappointment, as we realized any expectations we might have had about the pregnancy process were quickly changing due to the current global circumstances. Simultaneously, we acknowledged our place of privilege—that is, to be experiencing this pregnancy from the perspective of middle-class, heterosexual, and married couple, who both remained employed

during the pandemic. There were many stories of pregnant women delivering their babies alone, without their partners, and wearing masks while in labour at hospitals overrun with COVID-19 patients. In terms of race, statistics show that “African American women across the income spectrum and from all walks of life are dying from preventable pregnancy-related complications at three to four times the rate of non-Hispanic white women (qtd. in Taylor et al). Access to essential health needs for all pregnant women became an overwhelming concern as the pandemic grew.

### Case Studies

In preparing research for this article, I used Google forms and surveyed ten women who were pregnant or still currently pregnant during the time of the COVID-19 outbreak in July 2020. In this article, I examine my experience as a sculptor, arts educator, and pregnant woman during the COVID-19 crisis, which are paired with comparable stories and anecdotes collected from other pregnant women’s experiences during the pandemic. One woman gave birth in April 2020, during the height of the pandemic. She writes about her experience in the following statement:

I planned for a natural birth with a doula (whom I had already hired) and ended up deciding to go with a timed/planned c-section for security purposes. It drastically impacted my labour/delivery plans and for me making this choice was the hardest part of the impact of COVID-19. Coming up with a plan that felt safe was what overshadowed the pregnancy the past few weeks of my pregnancy. Delivery and being in the hospital [were] extremely stressful, as one had to interact with so many people and one was extremely worried whether one would get exposed—at any given moment. Hospitals did not feel safe, yet, for me personally, [they] felt safer than an in-home-delivery. I called friends of mine who are nurses/doctors to weigh the options and identify the path with the least options for exposure and one that gave me and my husband the most control to secure our baby would be born healthy.

Women across the country and globe have shared their stories and concerns for labour and delivery amid the coronavirus outbreak—from considering a major change to their birth plan to whether or not they should allow family members to visit their newborn. And, certainly, the worst and most crippling fear of all is what happens if myself or my unborn child is infected with COVID-19? An article in *The New York Times* shines light on this troublesome topic and concludes that researchers reported strong evidence that the coronavirus can be transmitted from a pregnant woman to the fetus. The

article follows the story of a Parisian mother who gave birth in March while testing positive for COVID-19, whose baby is healthy now at more than three months old but developed symptoms of inflammation in his brain as an infant (Belluck).

Although the news of this story provides some relief to expecting mothers that an unborn child can contract COVID-19 in utero but can survive postdelivery with a full recovery, it was also a troubling article because the long-term effects of this virus on infants is still largely unknown. The news of this story also came out just weeks after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention updated and expanded its list of people at higher risk of severe COVID-19 to include pregnant women (“CDC Updates”). With the addition of pregnancy to the category of higher risk individuals, many employers and institutions have been making additional accommodations to their pregnant employees. One case study interviewee shared this statement: “I have felt very supported by my employer although I’m always fearful I may be furloughed; my career hasn’t really been effected by the virus. My supervisor is probably giving me more leeway than if there were not a pandemic right now. Even after my three-month leave, I will likely spend an additional two months working from home.”

Personally, being isolated from colleagues during the entirety of my pregnancy and planning for an upcoming hybrid Fall 2020 semester not only has caused a wide range of emotions but also has resulted in many learning opportunities. Working in a collaborative environment, such as an art studio, I have gained tremendous support over the years from fellow women on how to navigate the ins and outs of working in fine arts academia; this advice has recently included how to navigate the planning of maternity leave. Now with the current pandemic underway, these resources are still present yet distant, as they manage and maintain their own family units and careers virtually. Brigid Schulte, a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and author of *Overworked*, observes that “Now that more couples are working from home, it’s impossible to ignore the fact that women bear so much more of the burden of childcare and housework” (qtd. in Gross). This adjustment due to COVID-19 is new to my mothering colleagues and mentors just as it is new to me and they can only offer advice based on their own personal experiences with family leave time in a pre-COVID world. In my experience, I am seeing an attempt by employers to extend maternity leave benefits to allow for more at-home work time for women during their pregnancy and also during postpartum. This doesn’t necessarily represent additional medical leave time however, as in my case, it may be an accommodation to teach virtually to prevent unnecessary exposure in my third trimester of pregnancy. A participant in the case study writes:

I actually felt more supported, as I received an extended period of maternity leave (as I initially wasn't that needed due to the adaptation to changes occurring). I was able to be the first on my team to transition to work-from-home and to be frank having a child during the pandemic gives you way more time with your baby. In addition, instead of needing to return to work, I started working from home which allows me to see my baby during lunch breaks, coffee/tea breaks and on top of that I don't lose any time commuting. Many [have] reported about the negative impact, I did not actually experience it that way. It's been a wonderful time for me & my partner as time has slowed down, there are way less distractions and we could fully dedicate our lives to our little baby.

Another mother-to-be shared her experience working at a hospital:

*We* are required to wear masks anytime that we are not in our personal office. While this is the safest way, I do find it more difficult being pregnant. I am winded much easier due to the pregnancy which makes wearing a mask seem extremely suffocating. My supervisor has been very understanding of my desire to remove myself from any and all unnecessary meetings in order to reduce my risk during this time so that support has been great. I feel that my career path is still on track.

The responses from these women reflect the resilience of the female mind and body, especially during these dynamic and precarious times of being pregnant amidst a pandemic. What I found most interesting in their feedback is an overall sense of hope. COVID-19 has introduced extreme experiences for pregnant women that are known risk factors for postpartum depression and anxiety such as 'exposure to excessive stress, living alone, inadequate social support, partner conflict, financial hardship, and a history of trauma' [all which] place the pregnant and postpartum woman at increased risk for the development of mental health challenges" (NIHCM 5). Perhaps the most valuable take away from these interviews is the shared advice from current pregnant women on how we can support future pregnant women, which comes from what they have learned from this unique experience. Some advice shared during these interviews amid the pandemic include:

- Host virtual meeting groups for pregnant women and/or new mothers.
- Additional delivery transparency from healthcare providers especially in changing circumstances.
- Support should come from lots of different sources: medical professionals, friends, family, and even strangers who are in the same

situation. We [pregnant women] might need a little more support right now as we learn to navigate what it means to be pregnant during this pandemic.

—The biggest toll is that I am unable to build relationships with other moms and seek advice/input.

—One is constantly worried if the child interacts with anyone aside from your household members. I wonder if one becomes overly cautious and anxious about others interacting with one's child.

This being my first year in a tenure-track faculty role, I have experienced more than most do in their first two semesters of teaching. This role, paired with the effects of COVID-19 and the additional effects of being pregnant in a pandemic, have created in me a 'mental load' that at times has felt insurmountable and exhausting (Gross). Pregnant women in 2020 are all still learning the consequences—social, mental, and career-related—of being at different stages of pregnancy during this global crisis. As I write this article at thirty-three weeks pregnant, my COVID-19 pregnancy journey is far from over. I am teaching virtual studio art classes for the fall 2020 semester, an accommodation given to me to teach remotely as a high-risk individual. This does ease some of the stress to know I am not exposing myself or my unborn child to the coronavirus, the virus which will inevitably return to campus when the students return early September. As of today, August 17, 2020, an article in the Washington Post indicates that the list of higher education institutions moving to remote learning this fall continues to grow as the infection rates across the U.S. do as well; the article highlights the "enormous challenges ahead for those in higher education who are pushing for professors and students to be able to meet on campus" (Anderson).

## **Conclusion**

At this point in time, I find myself worrying less about what this year as a pregnant woman means for my long-term career goals, such as its effects on my tenure application or my artistic practice as a mother. I'm more concerned about what this year means in terms of the future practice of the studio arts and the profession of teaching in general. In her article "Teaching Art Online Under COVID-19," Kaitlin Pomerantz perfectly articulates these concerns and fears felt by art faculty across the country, who have "questions about where this valuable teaching data, all these new free online lessons, will be housed and how they will be used in the future, with schools completely mum on the matter of intellectual property." Are our jobs going to be replaced permanently by online learning if we do too good of a job teaching online?

Will the additional amount of prep time for virtual or HyFlex teaching be considered as research development? What will higher education and a career in academics look like in the years following COVID-19?

As an artist and pregnant woman, I'm left pondering the words of Katherine Wardi-Zonna that art making should be a "therapeutic treatment explored by pregnant women, because first and foremost, they are in the process of creating themselves" (263). As a maker, the process of creating another human being has been akin to the process of creating one of my sculptural works in stone or metal. It has had its challenges, both physical and mental, and it has been a long, arduous process that I've found both rewarding and exhausting. I have found that maintaining my artistic practice in the same capacity as prepregnancy has been nearly impossible, but I can attribute that primarily to the isolation of COVID-19 and secondarily to growing a human for the past eight months. This time away from actively making has provided me period of reflection to reevaluate larger systemic issues in our American culture, which have been highlighted within the constraints of the coronavirus pandemic.

With the entirety of my pregnancy happening during COVID-19, I am encouraged by the words of one of the soon-to-be mothers in my survey, who states, "Babies will be born no matter what, so if nothing else, it has at least provided some sense of hope and certainty for the future that life will go on." Much like women who have delivered babies during times of hardship, the experience of childbirth is a natural one and one that continues with or without a pandemic.

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TRACEY NORMAN

## **Problematic Intersections: Dance, Motherhood, and the Pandemic**

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*The aim of this article is to create space for Canadian mother artists and academics in the dance field to discuss their experiences of mothering and working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversations relate to changes in or loss of employment and visioning for the future of this live art form in the aftermath of the pandemic. Artists are paid less, take longer to establish their careers and have less stability in their lives. These are only some of the reasons artists often choose not to have children. Infrastructure and support systems are not set up in the dance sector to assist caregivers. Since the body is the site of inquiry, the experiences of pregnancy, birth and the physical care of children are inextricably linked to one's livelihood. There are overwhelming concerns around childcare, support systems and equity, which have only been magnified by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As dance moves forward, the problem is that mothers of young children are not necessarily available to keep up with how changes to modes of pedagogy and performance might impact us in this already tenuous field. They are with their children for a large portion of the day, as caregiving responsibilities disproportionately fall to women in all sectors, but especially in dance in which annual income and society's value of the work is especially low. This writing endeavours to shine light on the struggles and breakthroughs of mothers working in academic and professional dance in Canada during COVID-19 and lay bare conversations we've historically participated in discreetly.*

This article examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on an already vulnerable group of Canadian artists and scholars in the field of dance. The research is largely in the form of testimonials, from interviews with forty mothers who are scholars and artists and who either work in the field of academic dance, straddle both academic dance and professional artistic work, or work mainly as professional dance artists with ties to academia. I am using the term “mother” to reflect the childcare and labour predominantly taken on by the mother role in our society. The aim of this article is to interrogate the systemic problems mothers have always faced in the dance field, which have now been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to highlight the positive contributions coming out of this time of crisis, including requesting reasonable and honest support as well as eliminating the social stigma around motherhood in dance.

### **Background and Context**

I interviewed forty participants of which all identify as women and mothers, except for one who identifies as a nonbinary parent. The interviewees are made up of colleagues I have worked with in some context and others whom I am less familiar with. Fourteen of the participants are BIPOC. The participants range in age from thirty through fifty-four, and all currently have children under fourteen-years old, implying a certain level of hands-on care and assistance. Two parents are caregiving for children with disabilities, and one of those mothers has a neurological disability herself. Six interviewees identify as single parents, two are coparenting, and the rest are partnered and share caregiving in the same dwelling. That said, 100 per cent identify as the main caregiver or the one doing more of the caregiving in their household. These artists and academics work in different dance forms in cities and rural areas across Canada as well as two Canadian citizens in post-secondary education and professional capacities in the United States. All except for one individual (the youngest interviewee) identify as mid-career, and the majority have an undergraduate or master’s degree, whereas the others attended post-secondary dance training institutions. All of them are considered active in the dance sector, although 90 per cent of them have lost some or most of their work during the pandemic.

The interviews for this research took place between August 1 and September 11, 2020. I interviewed 75 per cent of the participants by telephone and the remainder through questions sent via email. There were six questions I posed to each participant, and at times, conversations veered beyond these questions, steered by the respondent. Telephone interviews ranged from thirty-five to sixty-five minutes in length. Those who replied through email were on tight schedules, were in transition, or were caring for an infant, so it was easier for

them to respond in their own time. As I embarked on writing this article in early September 2020, children across Canada were about to return to school in person for the first time in six months. Many children were also beginning virtual schooling or homeschooling. My 5-year-old daughter was beginning senior kindergarten in person, and my two-year-old daughter was at home with my partner and me indefinitely. The home daycare she was enrolled in has closed due to COVID-19, and we were in a different place financially because over half of my expected teaching load at York University was reallocated due to changes in the curriculum and cancelled courses due to the pandemic. I have been a professional choreographer, performer, and producer for seventeen years and I have worked as a contract faculty member in the Dance Department at York University for over a decade. I identify as a white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and cisgender woman. I live a middle-class existence, in large part because I have a partner with a career in film and television, while my own work, like almost all of the participants I spoke with, is precarious, and my income is often sporadic and insufficient. Like many of the interviewees, I currently have less employment than at any point in my adult life as well as a huge caregiving load. I have been receiving income support from the federal government as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Shared Concerns in the Academic and Artistic Communities**

The concerns for mother academics in dance may be different from those of other mother artists; however, much unites them, especially during this pandemic, including the precarious nature of work, the scarcity of work, the dissolution of live performance and teaching, and the lack of boundaries between family and professional life. Based on Coast Salish territory in the area colonially known as Vancouver, dance scholar, artist, and mother to a ten-year-old, P. Megan Andrews expands on the academic-artistic link: “Thinking about mothers in the artistic context is different than the academic context and yet both were already existing contexts of precarity and challenge, generally for lots of folks, and then, specifically for mothers, there are so many aspects to consider both pre-existing pre-pandemic issues and then specifically pandemic-related ones.” Mothers of young children currently working in academic dance in Canada, are largely in contract faculty positions in university and college programs. Therefore, it can be extrapolated that during times of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a default to the mother becoming the main caregiver. Marie France Forcier mother of two young sons, full-time faculty member at the University of Calgary in the School of Creative and Performing Arts, and artistic director of Forcier Stage Works explains the following:

In terms of the needs of mothers, the problem is systemic. In many situations there is often a co-parent but it’s ubiquitously the main

caregiver role that falls to the woman. In heterosexual relationships, the male tends to have a greater salary, especially in dance. If creativity and physical literacy were more important in society, things would be different. It's extremely reductionist to tell parents this was *their* decision.

The dance milieu is steeped in scarcity and the training of young dancers by teachers and artists in precarious positions, means we are often acknowledging and forwarding these notions in our teaching both consciously and unconsciously.

There is research to show that even in households where women earn more, they assume much of the household workload (Van Der Linden). A July 2020 study from the Royal Bank of Canada shows that women's participation in the labour force is the lowest it's been in thirty years (Saba). Dance artists already live on such a fixed income that if they're in a partnership during a time of crisis, they become the main caregiver by default (if they were not already). Dance artists receive the lowest median income of all types of artists in Canada (Coles). Furthermore, for single mothers remaining in dance, it is nearly impossible to survive without significant familial or other support. As mothers in dance, we have always noticed an exodus of artists as they prepare for the early days of motherhood. Some of them come back to dance later, and some never do. No statistics even exist regarding artists who are in a main caregiver role, which is telling. Such studies have never been funded.

There is a lack of organizational support for those who wish to have a family and a career in dance, and although parent-artists have spoken about this for several years, only now, during the pandemic, are we beginning to see some acknowledgment and changes. Some arts councils at the municipal and provincial levels recently announced that childcare is now an eligible expense, which was previously not the case.

## **Hustle Culture and Expectations in the Dance Sector**

Hustle culture runs rampant in the arts and equally permeates both the academic and artistic dance communities. It is especially prevalent because dance is viewed as one's life, and, therefore, provides little time and energy for anything else, particularly children. Constant work, deadlines, and evaluations are not conducive to developing as an educator and artist. With COVID-19, mothers have even less time for work or for reflection. In addition, working from home during the pandemic is more suited for white-collar jobs and employees on salary, not in contract work (Lewis).

Much work in dance is unfunded or underfunded, which is a practice embedded in the contractual academic and artistic worlds. It is challenging to maintain this type of workload once we have families to care for. Bee Pallomina

who has her MFA in dance, a five-year-old son, and an artistic practice in Toronto says the following: “It was only after becoming a mom that I realized how much work (mainly unpaid) I was taking for granted that helped me maintain my career, from going to shows, taking classes to administrative work.” Unpaid work has come to define the dance sector to an even greater extent during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which there are expectations for artists to keep up in the digital world, and the related unpaid labour to do this is framed as professional development. There is also a tension between the roles of being a dancer and a mother, in which one’s body is a part of their identity and requires huge upkeep but the time for this is infrequent. Specifically, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when so much domestic responsibility falls to mothers, the relationship to one’s body and creativity is even more strained. One of my contract colleagues at York University, Tanya Berg, a mother to two children and also a contract faculty member at the University of Toronto shares the following: “When I had my daughter in my late twenties, she took over my life and I was lost. The same situation began to happen in March when suddenly I was so needed again. Where was I in this situation? Who was I now?” Coping with these massive changes we are experiencing requires recognition and awareness as well as time to pinpoint what is not working and then make adjustments. But that just isn’t happening for most of us.

In our work, kinesthetic and somatic awareness are specifically practiced and embedded in our daily experience. The current lack of a movement outlet during this time can be harmful to the psyche. Many of us depend on a regular movement practice to maintain our mental health and our careers. Jesse Dell, rural dance artist, teacher, and mother of three-year-old twins was already isolated from a large dance community and the pandemic has amplified this: “I don’t think I’m coping well with the stress and it’s manifesting physically. I think I was always a mindful person and coped with stress very well and now I don’t have that. Normally we practice being present as our job. Any activism that was a part of my life through being an artist is gone for now.” Dell’s last comment is an important one: several dimensions provided through our livelihood are missing due to the impact of COVID-19. The identities attained through our contributions to dance including creator, activist, educator, mentor and communicator are diminished by our current circumstances.

### **Patriarchy and Colonialism in Dance**

Artist mothers are disadvantaged in the movement of their careers by the patriarchal institutions of motherhood and art (Freney). Dance is somewhat unique in that it is made up of mainly women, yet leadership positions often fall to men. In Canada, 86 per cent of professional dancers are female (Coles).

Yet in a city like Toronto, some of the largest historically funded companies including Toronto Dance Theatre, Dancemakers, and The National Ballet of Canada have been run by men for the majority of their existence, even if they were founded by females. Berg's notions of institutional dance are becoming more widely accepted: "As with so many societal systems based in white supremacy and patriarchy, Western concert dance thrives in institutions that traditionally oppress women and marginalized groups. It is only through lasting systemic changes that women will be accommodated to allow for equity in the workplace." These lasting changes need to come through advocacy work and systemic change by provincial and federal organizations meant to protect artists, instead of continually through the work of individual artists and collectives. As Marie Tollon writes: "Based on the number of women in the field, the dance world should not only be run almost entirely by women, but should be setting the standard for how best to navigate work and motherhood! As we know, this is not the case. Not even close."

In artmaking and scholarly activities, when mothers work in an environment without fellow parents, there is a deep need to perform at a level that is not only the same as before we had children but indicates an even greater commitment to our work. What are we trying to prove and what is the consequence for working as if we never had children? Kate Hilliard contract faculty member in the School of Performance at Ryerson University, independent dance artist, and mother of two young sons shares the following:

The impact of the pandemic could be devastating. It's taken this long to acknowledge this art form is predominantly female driven and yet the greatest salaries and roles of power belong to men. Now some of the best thinkers in our communities are feeling stretched as mothers and artists. There's enough anger that it might be a catalyst for change, but our companies and institutions have to get on board for mothers and all parents.

Dance in Canada is beginning to tackle its whiteness and cultural appropriation. In pedagogy and performance realms, dance is becoming more inclusive, but with this invitation to others who may not have been included decades ago, there is much work to do. The current generation of students is asking for more. York University dance students Shenel Williams and Emma Whitla recently posted an open letter to the Dance Department, collecting hundreds of signatures online in an effort to have the department (which I work in) reconsider the current curriculum and its embedded colonialism. The letter reads: "Specifically, we are imploring you to hold the dance department accountable for its minimal recognition of BIPOC dance forms. The dance world is entrenched in white supremacy, though we have often ignored it in order to maintain the status quo and protect white fragility and tradition."

There is larger cultural diversity on stage than before; however as with the patriarchal issues in dance, the people who hold power in dance are often not people of colour.

### **Historically Hierarchical Training and a Focus on Youth**

Historically, dance has upheld a hierarchical model of training, and this is now shifting. Many of us who teach no longer wish to facilitate an experience in which the student is silent, except in the case of asking questions about movement. At the postsecondary level, it can be challenging for students to make choices and counter ideas after many years of standardized training. Dance, specifically, draws to it children who can take direction well. Lisa Emmons is a parent to a ten-year-old and is artistic director of Aeri Körper, a Canadian contemporary dance company based in Hamilton, Ontario. In pondering dance training, Emmons elaborates:

The way dance is taught needs more reflection. The most important need dance has is the way we're trained to change. From my own background, there was a theme of, "Do what I say, don't question or explore." The more dancers are empowered to push back, the more we can make change for what we need. We need to normalize dancers making choices for themselves, which leads to the ability to miss a rehearsal if needed or turn down a contract that doesn't work for our families.

Especially now, during this pandemic, preprofessional and professional artists and scholars need to advocate for themselves even more. Setting boundaries and saying "no" is something that needs to be part of a holistic education in dance and practiced widely.

Dance is a field that values youth and certain body types. As Pallomina expresses, "There is a tendency in our milieu towards youth that is undeniable. There is mid-career/middle-aged attrition in the dance scene. What does that mean for the form and how does it limit its progression and development? It means that knowledge is constantly being lost; continuity is broken, and there is a lack of efficiency and forward movement within the discipline." It's only recently that dance artists have been told we do not have to choose between a family and a career. Further to that, many of the artists I spoke with acknowledged the stigma around artistic work and scholarly research focused on mothering. Lucy Rupert, a Toronto-based dance artist and mother of an eleven-year old, explains the following: "There is a dichotomy in dance where you're just starting to figure it out and you're told your body is too old. But at the same time, we have examples of older dancers who are really coming into a new level. We're also told we're lucky we can dance and have babies as it was

much harder for the generation before us, but we're not always supported at the level we need." It's true that the previous generation was given even less permission to play the multiple roles of mother, artist, and scholar, yet there is still a heavy decision-making period most of us go through before becoming parents. Dana Michel, a Montreal-based dance artist and mother of a seven-year-old, further discusses this point:

Just before I got pregnant in my mid-thirties, I decided I was not going to have kids. I had always wanted to have kids, but I also love art and it is the thing that makes me not feel like a ghost. So that felt most important. Then I promptly got pregnant after leaving a job that had benefits and maternity leave. I had thought kids and art don't match. The overwhelming response was it's just not possible. Similar to being a Black person in the world, it's not possible but I'm here so we've got to figure it out.

This perspective, that *we* need to figure it out, is how we function as mothers in the field, as we often support one another, try to make inroads together, and spearhead initiatives to support those caring for small children. But without the work of mothers these initiatives which include sharing childcare during dance classes, pushing for childcare reimbursements from professional associations, and advocating for work to fall within hours that suit family life will fall short and will not become embedded in cultural practices. During this pandemic, mothers are barely available to push for equity in their circumstances and mothers of colour, in particular, have expressed the need to choose between advocating as a person of colour or as a mother at this juncture.

### **Mother-Artists Are Not at the Creative Table**

Coping with parenting and continuing along a professional trajectory have been almost impossible for most mother-artists during the pandemic and will surely affect the prevalence of mid-career artists and scholars going forwards for some time. Kathleen Rea is a mother to two young sons, the artistic director of REASON d'être Dance Productions, and has taught in the dance program at George Brown College for twenty years. She shares the following:

For those who are marginalized and face uphill battles in creating their dance careers, the pandemic losses are devastating. I lost all my dance work and my main focus became taking care of the kids, who were not in school, so that my husband was able to work from home. There has been little time to ponder how to recover my career. It really made me think of all the people in my situation, and how this will change who is at the creative table in years to come.

Specific work must be done to address the lack of accessibility during this time for mothers. Over the first six months of the pandemic, as envisioning and planning took place, it's been a challenge for mothers to be present for much of this, whether they have fulltime work or have lost or let go of much of their work. There is also an overwhelming feeling in the performing arts that creation and performance, as we have known them, could be over. As Rupert shares, "No lawyer is stuck at home thinking *oh this is over for me*. I've been doing this for twenty-five years, and it's ridiculous that it would be over." Perhaps, these anxieties are a product of the scarcity we are so accustomed to or the capitalistic model that dance and academia have bought into. The lack of leadership around models of care necessary for the high-level collaborative work we participate in is weighing us down. As Andrews argues, "Any time mothers are not part of the conversation, a huge and valuable perspective is missing. Different sets of values are not at the table and as a result, existing untenable structures for work/labour, creation, production, and presentation/publications, are reified and ossified. This represents a potential backwards slide."

Being a mother in dance can feel unsafe and uncomfortable. Most dance artists are not caregivers to children. Working in dance and having school-aged children places one on the margins. It is a common situation to be in a rehearsal studio with six other artists and to be the only parent in the room. As Rupert explains, "I've often been in rooms where there's something to be said about being a mom and an artist and I feel I can't say it because people in the room are not interested in hearing it. Until it feels safe to talk about that in rooms of colleagues, we are not going to move forwards." A way to move forwards may be to articulate our needs, not just with other mothers but to institutions, collaborators, colleagues, and employers and to do so en masse. However, many mothers are in a habit of consistently reinventing themselves to fit into the standards of the field or taking on peripheral roles in field that suit their lifestyle. Emily Cheung has been artistic director of Little Pear Garden Dance Company for fifteen years and is mother to an eleven-year-old son. Based in Toronto, Cheung holds her MA in dance and leads performance and scholarly work. As leader of the only Chinese dance company in Canada that performs both traditional and contemporary works, Cheung, like many, is not accustomed to the mentality that we can necessarily ask for what we need in dance: "Instead of saying my needs are not met, for me, I have always been surviving with what I have. I've barely even thought about how things could be better because I don't have any leisure time. I do dream of things, but I don't even go there because there needs to be more discussion and supporting Canadian artists who have children." Cheung is representative of many mothers who during this pandemic have been keeping kids home to learn so they can also maintain care of their elders in a way that does not put

anyone at risk. This sandwich generation is particularly burdened by the pandemic.

When querying about what would happen if fewer mid-career artist mothers could continue their work at the rate they had prepandemic, many interviewees spoke of the knowledge, care, and expertise that will be lost. Pallomina brought up intriguing insights specific to mothers in dance:

Motherhood means a whole lot of radical thinking, learning, and embodying in terms of a transforming body, care for new life, observation of developmental movement patterning, development of language, and development of fine and gross motor skill. Not that we are the only people who observe or know these things I'm describing but there is a richness in the specific knowledge of each individual who is not able to maintain their practice that will be lost.

### **A History of Not Being at the Table in Academic Dance**

In dance, most of those teaching in academia have been and continue to be working artists. Like the professional dance trajectory, dance academics are often reaching great heights in their careers, just as they are beginning to start a family. In academia, to move ahead one must be ready and willing to relocate. This is dissuasive and challenging once children are on board. COVID-19 has presented a further setback in this realm, in that now is not the time for women to take financial and career risks. Now is the time to make our children feel secure amidst a level of uncertainty we have never collectively faced before. Berg's narrative on choice-making around an academic career is like that of many mothers:

I know that my children are the reason that I do not have a fulltime job at a university because I have only applied to a handful of universities that are within a short flight of Toronto. I tell my fourteen-year-old daughter, who is thinking about becoming a veterinarian, that it is a myth that women can have it all in this society. If you have a fulltime job and a family, there are compromises that must be made to make it all work, and often in Canadian society, those compromises fall to the mother. This is not to discourage her dreams; rather, I hope to save her some heartbreak by embedding this reality, and I hope to affect societal change, as Gen Z is the most powerful and knowledgeable set of women thus far.

During my interviews with those academic mothers, they often acknowledged that having a family makes one less appealing in certain hiring circumstances and that it is rare that one's family is considered heavily when taking

on new jobs or dealing with new issues that arise, for instance as many of us now teach virtually from home.

Gaining any security for those who educate on contract in academia means radical change either to one's own lifestyle, as Berg expressed, or to the system as it is currently structured in Canada. The precarity in academia means there is no security through consistent financial income; more over there is no ability to schedule for the coming year or be present as needed to raise children. In order to move forwards and create space for mothers, academia must redefine productivity in light of the understanding that the experience of being a mother brings wisdom to one's work (Martin). Dance, in particular, embraces the feminine and a deep level of care; empathetic people are often drawn to it. Jennifer Bolt, one of my colleagues in dance at York University, has worked in academia for twenty years in both dance and education and is the mother to an eleven-year-old son. What she shares resonates deeply with me:

So often my desire to help my students will trump what I should be doing to advance my career in academia: publishing. Considering the feminist standpoint and the ethics of care, I must be a textbook case. As a contract faculty member, we are rarely given paid research sabbaticals like fulltime faculty, which would allow time to pause and focus on research. Any research before or since my doctoral dissertation has been squeezed in on top of a full teaching-load and other dance projects and at the expense of time with my son and family, and so the cycle continues. So often I feel the university does not value the quality of teaching as much as the production of research. For me, the academic and professional dance journey have been a personal narrative of persistence, resilience, internal motivation and striving for excellence. I feel I am making a difference in young people's lives, and for me that counts for a lot.

For many of us, this sentiment is true, and having our own children in many cases has made us more empathetic with our students, which translates to more hours spent in dialogue with them, as well as implementing strategies of inclusion and equity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this work becomes particularly taxing, as the needs are high for even the most stable of students. Many respondents speak to constant worry about their students and their own children as well as the time they put into trying to lessen the negative impact of the pandemic.

### **Supporting Mothers in Dance**

The sense of community that has often been promoted in Canadian dance is showing its cracks more than ever now during the multiple crises of health and

social justice we are experiencing. The dance community's weakness of not having a governing body may also be its strength, in its ability to be agile and interconnected, especially with a focus on the intersectionality of its members. Susie Burpee, a renowned Toronto-based dance artist, scholar, and mother of two young children, completed her MA in drama performance studies with her daughters at home during the pandemic and expands on this topic:

The field of dance in Canada could use some serious mothering right now. We need to move care to the forefront and face the reality that the dance community does not exist as we might think. This has become apparent these past few months. The community is not one big imaginary circle; rather, it's made up of small intersecting networks. And so, mothering as an approach in this instance is a model for care, which is about working on the self and others closest to you in order to make a positive contribution, which ripples out into other networks.

This dramaturgical mothering model would be helpful in the larger scheme and within local neighbourhoods, schools, and dance sub-communities. Choreographer, teacher, performer, and mother of a one-year-old son, Natasha Powell, whose company Holla Jazz has had an exceptional rise over the last few years, elaborates on this issue:

How do we actually create villages? It doesn't have to be just a village of moms. It's us supporting each other and our mental health. Centre each other instead of centring the work. Think more about the people behind the work. There has to be a way to coexist. The dance community doesn't embrace parenthood. You're forgotten about or it's assumed you're going to make work about parenthood. Let's not segregate people into parent groups.

Support systems are needed in a variety of contexts, and during this pandemic and what may follow, there are offerings that will continue to be useful while artists spend more time at home. In this virtual world, artists and educators are experiencing the new connections that have been made, and this may include further opportunities for mothers to teach and create from home. Sally Morgan, a Halifax-based artist and educator, is a single mother (recently partnered) of an eleven-year-old daughter and has just begun a year-long artist residency in motherhood (ARiM) through the mentorship of Lenka Clayton, with her collective, the sense archive, funded through Arts Nova Scotia. Virtual opportunities allowed her to take part more often: "I think that the continuation of online workshops, artist talks, and conferences can only enable not just mothers who have commitments to childcare and domestic life but many others who are restricted because of access to funding, or have social,

mental, or physical challenges or disabilities.” Virtual connections through social media and blogs make it more possible than ever for women to find opportunities to be intimate with other mothers, make meaning of their experiences, and learn from each other (Freney). The umbrella of support for children and caregivers in the arts needs to expand to allow for the following: affordable childcare that can be accessed part time and around unconventional schedules; meetings and events scheduled at times that are appropriate for parents; performance options to attend and be involved in that kids can also attend; spaces where kids are welcome; budget lines in grant applications for childcare; and a structure for sharing resources.

### **Normalizing the Presence of Children in Our Work**

In Canadian society, the relationships between children, employment, and the overlaps therein are complex. It’s a Western notion to silo our families and to separate work from children so distinctly. There are caveats to this in our culture; in farm life, for instance, children are often intertwined with the work. I can remember in my own upbringing being involved in collecting and selling eggs from our farm and making many trips with my father to farm auctions. In many First Nations communities, the lines between children and work are purposely blurred. Dell, who is partnered and has two children with a Mohawk man, lives on the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory and shares as follows: “Here, bringing your children with you everywhere is assumed and normalized. In my experience, there is more space and time for kids at all events, work related or not. Western-style meetings are very scripted, and there’s not much time for any talk outside of the business. But here, there is social talk throughout meetings and children come to work. The work may take longer, but this doesn’t seem to bother anyone.”

This idea of what is normalized is a clue to the underlying issues. When children inhabit our workspaces, studios, theatres, and offices, it can be challenging for all involved. Diana Lopez Soto, a rural aerial dance artist and mother of two, shares her realizations that arose while trying to juggle her work and children during the pandemic: “As mothers we take care of our bodies so little that it’s important that what you do nurtures you, or it will break you. My kids come with me wherever I go, whether in spirit or in person. I need to understand this first, and those I work with need to understand that moving forwards.” There is a blurring of all family and work boundaries during this pandemic, which seems to be having a positive effect on many of the people I spoke with. Burpee recently started taking her Zoom work calls in her kitchen, with evidence of her family life all around her, and shares of this experience: “This was a big shift. I made the decision to allow the personal to enter my work. I think I was tired of hiding my family life, and COVID gave

me an opportunity to test drive the blending of worlds.” The pandemic is making family life more visible and, therefore, accepted in a different way while many of us teach or rehearse from home. This shift is palpable for many of us right now, as we feel more courageous to acknowledge the presence of our children in our work and not apologise for it. That feels radically different.

The odd hours brought about by a life in dance means it is often impossible to work without children around. There is adaptation that needs to take place on all ends, employers, collaborators, colleagues, students, as well as parents and children themselves in order to remain present and feel validated. I have witnessed the growth in my children, students, collaborators, and myself when I bring my children into my workspace, which points to the idea that children are an essential part of life to be embraced in myriad environments. As Emmons says: “We need to normalize having children in the world. At a meeting, if my son interrupts that’s not a bad thing. Children should be seen and heard in everything. Parent-artists should have priority because we represent a lot of other people who are parents.” But in dance, since being a parent puts you in the minority, the issues surrounding caregiving and how those impact our artform are not relatable to most of our collaborators. Since so much of the work we make and engage with is about the human condition, supporting life seems paramount. As Michel shares, “We need more respect for kids. If people could actually regard children as an important part of society, we would get somewhere.” There are societies in which children are held in higher regard and there are societies in which artists are revered in much different ways than in Canada. The support needed to be both a parent and an artist must be elevated if there is a desire for future generations to be afforded both a livelihood that includes an artistic practice and a family.

### **Parenting Lessons Derived from COVID-19 and Directions for the Future**

Many of the mothers I interviewed discussed having a deeper understanding of their children after being home together for several months amid a dissolution of regular boundaries. As Hilliard notes: “Coping during this time is an ongoing understanding. I’ve been so involved in my children’s education, and I know much more about them now that I’ve been the one to administer their program. The kids are not going back to school this fall and I feel better prepared about how to work with them at home.” The intensive time together has allowed many of us to focus differently on aspects of our parenting and certainly to be more inventive as we become more intimate with underlying issues in our homes when we cannot physically leave them.

There is also the effect that the pandemic has had on our work as scholars and artists and how it could help our work in the future in positive ways. Since we are all involved in practice-based research, this hiatus from life as we knew

it allows for us to garner information and resources we would not have if not faced with the challenge of this pandemic. Many parents I spoke with shed light on this in their own practices including Andrews who speaks to the spillover of her and her family's growth:

The learning and growing I've done as a parent in this time has been hard and ultimately very good. Somehow, the sustained situation of being home together all the time has provided insights that I don't think I would have gained otherwise. It has also enabled us to develop some new and really positive relational patterns that are solid enough (because of the length of time) that I believe they will persist going forwards and serve us well. Because my practice-based research centres on ethical relationality, all of this learning resonates and reverberates through my artistic and academic work.

These positive outcomes and the changes proposed in this article will take time to enact. We must recognize the limitations set upon us by this pandemic but simultaneously note that none of the issues discussed here are arising for the first time. This may feel like a low moment for dance and advancement in the field, although it is also a moment to be inventive and attune ourselves to others playing a part in the current cultural upheaval, especially those with intersecting identities. I've previously been at conferences for artist-parents and in conversation with many of the people I interviewed for this article, and never have I experienced them speaking truth to power the way they are now. This is a time of reckoning and a time to ask for what we need in clear and concise terms and without apology. Above all, we must insist on celebrating the profound knowledge that comes with motherhood and the constant and ever-revolving dance between our personal and professional lives.

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ROBIN SILBERGLEID

## **A Problem of One's Own: Single Mothering, Self-Reliance, and Care in the Time of the Coronavirus**

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*This essay uses my experience as an American academic single mother as a point of entry into a conversation about the particular complexities of single motherhood during the stay-at-home order. Although quantitative research indicates pressures on all families, single mothers—especially those with school-aged children or younger—are hit particularly hard, as there is no recourse to public school, paid childcare, or other forms of outside help during this time. The toll on mental and physical health due to social isolation, as well as an increased workload, is significant. What strategies and policies may help mothers cope? In the absence of respite by others, what does “self-care” mean for single mothers during this time?*

*A hybrid critical-creative, or auto-theoretical, piece, this essay braids together three strands: personal discussion of parenting while single during the stay-at-home order, an analysis of the heteronormative nature of academic work, and a reading of Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own. In doing so, this piece uses the pandemic as a lens through which to explore maternal wellbeing in general as well as the fault lines of the heteronormative workplace and the ideal worker.*

6:00 am. First flush of dawn. I close my eyes, burrow deeper into the sheets, and ignore the call of the cats for food. For a moment, I can almost forget the pandemic, can almost forget that the country is torn apart, that I'll need to wake and deal with working and mothering in this unfathomable moment. Almost. There are rare weekend mornings I go back to sleep, forget the cats, forget the kids. Most mornings, I rise. I sit in the rocking chair where I used to hold my children. I read a book, a few pages (something, anything towards “research”). If I don't carve out this time before everything else, it is not going to happen. I will get caught up in the daily onslaught of the domestic, the cooking and cleaning and cajoling. (Please brush your teeth! Please wear shoes! Please do your math!) I can't handle another day like this. I just can't.

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When I proposed this essay, back in the spring, when the novel coronavirus was truly novel, I had wanted to use my own experiences as a point of entry into a conversation about the particular complexities of being a single mother and an academic during the stay-at-home order in the United States. More broadly, I had hoped to use the pandemic as a lens through which to explore maternal wellbeing in general as well as the fault lines of the heteronormative model of academic labour practices and informal policies of the corporate university. Although qualitative research (not to mention common sense!) indicates that stay-at-home orders put pressure on all families, single mothers—especially those with school-aged or younger children—are hit particularly hard, as there is no recourse to public school, paid childcare, or other forms of outside help during this time. The toll on mental and physical health due to social isolation on top of increased workload is significant—at times, almost unbearable. In writing the abstract, I wanted to ask: What strategies and policies may help mothers cope? In the absence of respite by others, what does “self-care” mean for single mothers during this time? It is now late summer, I am still largely without childcare, and, at best, I hope to offer some notes towards these ends. A hybrid critical-creative, or auto-theoretical, piece, this essay braids together three strands: a personal discussion of parenting while single during the stay-at-home order, an analysis of the heteronormative nature of academic work through Jane Juffer’s *Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual*, and a reading of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. This essay takes its shape around time—the course of a day as well as the months of the pandemic (which is ongoing)—as it is in concrete moments that we can actually see the complex dynamics of single parenting at work.

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### **Any Afternoon, April 2020**

“Yo Mom, I’m slipping. Yo Mom I’m slipping.” My son calls from the kitchen, where he is poised on the counter taping stained glass colouring sheets to our window for our neighbours to see in our daily exchange of messages. “Mom, Mom, Mom, down, done, Mom,” he says.

The tableau in front of me: laptop, coffee cup, coloured pencils in a mason jar, and two partly eaten slices of pizza on a holiday plate. I’m trying to work. My eight-year-old is talking literally nonstop. He is now across the room mumbling to our cats, Darwin and Vincent: “Mom, mom, mom, me and Darwin just said our apologies.” As he talks, I type what he’s saying directly into an open Word document: “I apologized for being mean to him and going after him with the claw, and he apologized for breaking my wire, and he

would never do it again. Mom, mom, mom, look at my feet. Mom, mom, mom.”

This is of course a typical scene in these weeks (this is week four) of the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders. My teenager is upstairs on a Zoom call. My son is now rolling around on the floor. This all in the past five minutes. My situation is extreme but not unique. Informal qualitative research says that parents are interrupted from work on average every 3.5 minutes while their children are also home (Edwards and Snyder).

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In all meaningful ways, this essay really begins with a choice made in 2001. I submitted my formatted dissertation to the graduate school, accepted a tenure-track job, and decided to become a single mother. This narrative, which is detailed in my memoir *Texas Girl* (2014), is unquestionably the defining decision of my life. My children are now sixteen and eight. As Jane Juffer notes in *Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual*, the organization Single Mothers by Choice (SMC), which I affiliated with and looked to for guidance, “distances itself from any form of dependency” and adopts a “discourse of self-reliance” (2). When I made the decision to become an SMC, I accepted that as fact and honour. I was an independent woman; I had a steady job, could afford to become pregnant (via relatively expensive treatment), and raise a child (children) on my own. I now recognize that such self-reliance is a strength, but it has also created a particular form of vulnerability during this pandemic. Although I have never assumed that anyone would ever take care of me or my kids, now we are truly alone.

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“Single mothers are asked to prove their ability to govern themselves as subjects of freedom—freedom from any kind of dependency—in order to qualify as normal” (Juffer 5).

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I have in these past weeks of the virus been thinking a lot about Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, which famously argues that women need material resources in order to write. Although Woolf does not explicitly reference the need for childcare, her reflections on “women and fiction” foreground the historical poverty of the female sex, women’s dependence upon men and marriage (which is to say, patriarchy), and lack of privacy and its effect on literary production. In short, women do not have time to write because they are having and raising children (the example Woolf gives has thirteen). In order for women to write (to be a poet, ideally, according to Woolf), she must have five hundred pounds a year (which is to say, a middle-class salary) and a room of her own (with a lock!). This argument is both symbolic and, more significantly for my purposes here, material. At multiple

points, Woolf speculates that within a hundred years (please note: *Room* was given as speeches in October 1928 and then published in 1929!) that this achievement will be possible. Well, Virginia, what would you say now?

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I bring my copy of Woolf as well as my laptop and coffee into the kitchen; I slice some crescents of red onions to sizzle in a pan with some potatoes, making something resembling a late breakfast. I keep my computer on the kitchen island, which is exactly the right height for a standing desk when you are just over five feet tall. I stir the onions. I sip the coffee. I turn pages in Virginia Woolf: “Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licenses of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here—how, bowed down by the weight of the subject which you have laid upon my shoulders, I pondered it, and made it work in and out of my daily life” (4). This essay, too, works in and out of my daily life.

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The title of my recent book was going to be *Mother Is a Verb*. That declaration has never seemed more apt. I cook. I clean. I read. I write. I listen. I hug. I teach second-grade math. I comment on student writing. I attend meetings over Zoom. I put to bed. I work (broadly construed, doing things that are necessary for my job or keeping my household going) from the time I wake up until the time I decide I can’t handle it anymore. Around 10:15 p.m., I go upstairs, read or watch something on Netflix I wouldn’t watch with my teenager, and then fall asleep. When I wake up, I do it again. I was asked by my reproductive endocrinologist back at age twenty-nine about strategies for navigating work-life balance (although she didn’t call it that) before she agreed to inseminate me. I was not asked, however, about surviving a pandemic as a single mother of two. I am thankful each day that my children are older. I cannot imagine what this would be if my youngest were still under five and not sleeping through the night. At least, I am sleeping. At least, there’s that.

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“Single mothers are ‘domestic intellectuals’ operating within the usually denigrated realms of childcare and housework to rearticulate these realms as ones of potential political, economic, and social possibility” (Juffer 4).

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More background: I am a tenured associate professor of English and an administrator of a large undergraduate program at a research-intensive university. My creative writing and scholarship focus on (single) mothering and infertility. I am writing from home (well, we are all home now) during a semester that I am theoretically on sabbatical. I say “theoretically” because my sabbatical was

already partly eaten up by directing three honours theses and also doing program administration (another story for another day; I will take it up with my dean). And just at the moment mid-semester when I really thought I'd hit my groove, found a working rhythm, found an organization for my book manuscript, decided not to check email at all before 3:00 p.m. EVER (my note to myself said)—then came COVID-19. My university has a medical doctor as president; we shut down fast, as soon as the first case in the state was announced.

I have spiraled through ALL THE FEELINGS on an almost hourly basis. In none of this am I unique. I consider myself simultaneously fortunate, even as my own circumstances are also less than ideal; I'm an upper-middle-class single mother of two children with a large age gap (thank you, infertility!). I have a secure job (tenure!) and enough money that I am the one ordering take out, not the one delivering take out. I remind myself of this hourly: I have a job that is paying me to stay home. I cannot complain. But I also spiral through cyclical rage; I spent the past seven years working to earn this sabbatical that has been taken away both by a virus and by the ordinary workings of the university. I am a person who thrives on large amounts of quiet and right now I have absolutely none unless I leave our house and take a walk around the block which I can do only because I have a teenager who can watch the eight-year-old for short periods of time. If I have always felt the tension between work and home as an academic single mother it is exacerbated right now. There is no separation.

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“Intellectual freedom depends on material things” (Woolf 106).

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I should not need to say any of this for this audience, which consists mostly of mothers or people who care about mothers. Yes, this crisis puts particular pressures on mothers. But I don't think I am overstating it when I say it is particularly horrible for single mothers (single parents). Although I generally find solidarity in talking to other mothers, regardless of their marital status, this moment highlights the particular vulnerabilities of single mothers (and, even more so, single mothers who do not have a coparent in another household). Beyond the material and practical issues of trying to work while children are home, there lurks the bigger existential question: What if I got sick? What if I got really sick? What if I died? Who would take care of my kids?

For all the conversations about intersectionality in the university and for all the awareness about privilege (race, class, sex, and gender), there is very little acknowledgment of the way that couples (regardless of sexual orientation) are privileged in discourse and in the practicalities of everyday life, particularly including the so-called family-friendly university as a workplace. Social psychologist Bella DePaulo characterizes this phenomenon of discrimination

against unmarried individuals as “singlism,” remarking on mundane practices, such as family-centred work events and, more significantly, social security benefits that go to a spouse. The convergence of singlism with sexism and discrimination against mothers means that single parents occupy a particularly tricky position that has come to a crisis during this pandemic. In the simplest of terms, if you live with a spouse, you have a second pair of adult hands.

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In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf does not imagine the possibility that a mother may be able to have time and a room in which to write if she has a partner who could take care of her kids. The possibility that she could be a single mother at all—remember the sad tale of Judith Shakespeare?—was unfathomable when Woolf was writing one hundred years ago. The fact that I can have children as a single parent by choice is a result of both advances in reproductive technology and financial independence. What I did not see—could not see—when I made the choice now twenty years ago to attempt solo motherhood was that the personal values that made such reproductive choices possible (self-reliance!!) would also be my family's undoing.

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“Of the two—the vote and the money—the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important” (Woolf 37).

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I don't often play what I think of as “the single mom card.” Most of what I experience I think of as generalizable to most working (professional) mothers (i.e., How do you do your job and get food on the table at night?). But I am also well aware that I rely heavily (at least in the times before COVID-19)—as any working single mother does—on paid childcare in order to do what I do. And now all the support systems I have built up over years—I did build my village!—have been stripped away. I have friends who would love to take my kid for an afternoon, but they can't without potentially risking their own health or ours. The best they can do is to offer to Zoom with him or to write him a letter so he can practice his handwriting. This is not nothing. But day after day, we are home alone. I am drinking more wine than I probably should. My son is literally pulling out his hair. My teen is retreating further inwards. In writing this, I am risking judgment: *See, it's really not good for kids to grow up with only one parent.* This is the neoliberal narrative, anyway, of heteronormative bias towards the nuclear family (and away from funding for public health, education, and childcare).

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I am so angry. So deeply sad.

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## Afternoon, in the Time of the Virus

I am writing this from my kitchen while I wait for my son to come to the “fun learning centre” (the dining table) to write a letter to his pen pal. Although we have an afternoon schedule posted—and my son helped design it—it is still thirty-four minutes (and counting) after this writing time was supposed to begin. He announces he needs some water: Do we have lemonade? Upstairs, my teenager practices the violin (the same sequence of notes on endless loop). I have a migraine simmering at the base of my skull, radiating down my shoulder and into my arm. This slippage between the posted schedule and the reality is, I realize, part of what is particularly challenging for me about this moment. I am not in charge of my time. I am not in charge of my environment, which is to say: I am not in charge of my life.

When I chose to have my children—and I did choose, as a single mother—I did not ever imagine a situation in which I would be home with them, not at my workplace, for more than four months. I have no control.

It's now forty minutes. He has only written two words. Dear S—

I have written three paragraphs on this essay.

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I can't tell you how many times within the frame of “work-life balance,” I have heard some variation on “I don't know how you do it.” Single mothers are either judged (the 1990s stereotype of the welfare mom) or extolled as independent and capable (the white, middle-class SMC), both of which erase the particularity and precarity of most single parents. Describing this paradox, Juffer remarks that “Single mothers emerge as a respected identity group in the context of the neoliberal production of the self-regulating citizen-consumer subject.... At the same time the project of neoliberalism and its insistence on cutting social programs and expanding private enterprise has been making life increasingly difficult for many single mothers” (4). The situation of a single mother during COVID 19 means that I am by definition high risk; I can't get sick. I prioritize sleep, food, and basic needs.

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The articles proliferate online these days calling attention to the ways that male academics (with partners and/or without kids) are able to produce more during this time of essential work, whereas female academics (if married, with kids) are penalized, which will no doubt have effects on our promotions and salaries for years to come (Flaherty). This phenomenon is, of course, a preexisting phenomenon exacerbated by the conditions of the pandemic (Mason and Goulden). And single mothers, as Bridgid Schulte observes in

non-COVID-19 circumstances, are already the most “time poor” of all (25). These days, my childcare is my teen (one hour per day!), plus the television, and another stolen hour when my elementary schooler reads to his grandmother over Zoom (one less struggle over his school work each day, and also time that he is doing something other than watching cartoons).

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In this time of the coronavirus, the boundaries between work and home blur until they no longer exist. In one of the strangest and most profound moments of pandemic life, I attend our college faculty meeting virtually, my own microphone muted and video off. At the same time, I am shredding a chicken for dinner; my children are looking at their own screens. When dinner is ready and the dean is still talking, I go into the bathroom to wash the sink with disinfectant wipes, still listening to the Zoom call. What does it mean that I can listen to my dean and clean my bathroom at the same time? My friend and colleague Zarena Aslami says, profoundly, “Under neoliberalism, we could say that the slash between work and life in the worn-out phrase work/life balance does not actually suggest a seesaw-like fulcrum between two separate domains. Instead, the slash masks an equal sign that signifies the full-scale economization of all aspects and faculties of human life” (103).

\*

I was asked to write a report of my sabbatical activities, which I did from my car, in the driveway, during a rainstorm, while my kids fought in the house over a baking project, because it was the only quiet I had. I wrote as much in the document.

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“The book has somehow to be adapted to the body and at a venture one would say that women’s books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work” (Woolf 77).

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I have been stewing for a while about the phrase “culture of care,” which is my college’s guiding value principle.<sup>1</sup> I like it, as far as guiding principles go, as a way to frame the kind of work that we do in the humanities and arts, as centred on the human being, our ethical responsibilities. But this summer, as there are urgent online meetings about online teaching while we are off contract (which is to say, not paid), it occurs to me that for all this rhetoric, we don’t really talk about valuing care as a verb, which is to say, an actual practice of caregiving. Who is doing this work? In what contexts? What does it mean to care for our students online, when we are literally simultaneously caring for our children who are at home? Can we talk about caring for faculty, who are tasked to care?

Where are the children while we attend faculty meetings via Zoom, in our homes, while we are unpaid? Watching TV? I have to mute my microphone to talk to my son who walks into the middle of meetings for a snack because the meeting is on my computer screen in my kitchen.

Let me state this as clearly as I can: Our children are being erased from the spaces that should be theirs as our homes become our workplaces.

I want the dean out of my kitchen.

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The pandemic makes clear the problem that was always already there. The truth is that academic work has always relied on unseen and unspoken domestic labor. As Juffer puts it, “Despite the fact that much academic scholarship in the humanities, especially in feminism and gay studies, critiques the nuclear family norm and reveals its nationalist, racist, homophobic, and sexist effects, academic work *practices* rely on the nuclear family as the most viable form of both raising children and achieving tenure and promotion” (89)—more generally, that is, doing academic work. This dynamic becomes particularly clear when university leaders ask us to do work while we are unpaid, over the summer, while also watching our children, because there is no camp or childcare as we usually rely on to do the research we can’t do at other times of year, when we are too busy doing the feminized work of committees and administration. Some more bricks added to the maternal wall.

I don’t have an easy answer, but I do wonder what would it mean if instead of rewarding faculty for output—when there are, in fact, no longer raises but pay cuts for many of us—to acknowledge what it is that we actually do and how we do it in our annual reviews. Our academic labour is never divorced from but always dependent upon caregiving practices that are usually unseen and unspoken. As Maggie Nelson remarks in *The Argonauts*, “Here I estimate that about nine-tenths of the words in this book were written ‘free,’ the other one-tenth hooked up to a hospital-grade breast pump: words piled into one machine, milk siphoned out by another” (100). What would it mean to use “professional development funds”—if you have any to begin with—for outsourcing childcare? The motherhood penalty reaches a crisis in pandemic times when those who don’t have caregiving responsibilities, and those who are healthy, can get ahead, whereas those of us who do have such responsibilities are particularly burdened. I have two (or more?) fulltime jobs.

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## June

When the kids get out of school and my state begins to open up, I cobble together modestly safe childcare. I hire a teenager who lives two doors down,

whose family I (mostly) trust, to watch my son outdoors for two hours a day. They walk her dog. They do sidewalk chalk. They play badminton or bean bags and sometimes go to the playground (with hand sanitizer, of course). Additionally, my own teen is leading their brother in a “camp,” which involves a lot of biking and baking and a subscription to Little Passports. If they are indoors, I sit outside and write. If they are outdoors, I stand at the kitchen counter or work in my home office. The difference between four hours of childcare in a day and one hour is astonishing (and this is still half of what I’m used to, as I used to rely on “after care” until about 4:30 p.m. or 5:00 p.m. in a typical summer). I can take a walk (a walk!). I can slow down enough to think. I am a better mother because I am not mothering all the freaking time. I start to work in earnest on this essay.

Still, with this decision comes worry of exposure to COVID-19, as I see the teen drive off with her friends she was supposedly distanced from. It’s an impossible choice. My children’s physical safety vs. their psychological wellbeing vs. my ability to do even a minimum of work. It’s an impossible choice. One of many.

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“The human frame being what it is, heart, body and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments as they will be no doubt in another million years, a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well” (Woolf 18).

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Describing the single mother as a domestic intellectual, Juffer writes, “She operates within the mundane and everyday routines of domestic life. She is an organizer and as such she provides insights into how to valorize organizing in other realms, such as the academy (where organizing is routinely devalued in comparison to publishing and other individual acts” (9). If, following Juffer, single mothers serve as synecdoche for domestic intellectuals, I also want to pause to qualify the risk in recentring her as some sort of neoliberal heroine. In *Matricentric Feminism*, Andrea O’Reilly provocatively suggests that “non-normative mothers”—which, by definition includes single mothers and queer mothers—“must implement nonpatriarchal mothering practices that, in their very otherness, open up to new possibilities for mothering” (76); in doing so, she claims “these mothers in their very unacceptability show us more empowering ways to mother and be mothered” (76). And while I am flattered, to be sure, I would instead say that the heteropatriarchal assumptions of the nuclear family stifle and blind both the culture and individual mothers to creative thinking and to taking care of themselves. In practical terms, single

parenting in a pandemic is absurdly hard because there is no respite at all. This time, more than any in my sixteen years as a single parent, I have wished for an alternative living arrangement, not a partner, but perhaps what a friend calls a “mommune.” But fantasizing won’t help at all in my immediate present. Thus, following Juffer and O’Reilly, we may do well to look at the situation through the lens of the single mother. But we should not do so without acknowledging the material reality in which she lives.

What Virginia Woolf reminds us is that working conditions matter. The working body matters. It needs to be fed, cared for. Making gluten-free brownies with my son in the middle of a work day, right now, that matters. Care is work, not a culture.

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### **Evening, Late Summer, in the Time of the Virus**

I am taking a “staycation” with my family. We are watching movies and doing puzzles and creating a water park in the backyard. I am doing this because I am not an essential worker, although the work that I do feels essential to me. And this time “off” will support the work that I will do later in the classroom come fall. I am not compulsively checking Twitter or the *New York Times* and I am not creating busy work and I am not checking email. I am feeding my body and my soul. And then I will get back to work.

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It would be easy at this turn in the essay to outline a series of strategies for academic parents to make it through this time of the virus. If the goal is time management and academic productivity, I could recommend as a first resource the book *The Slow Professor* as well as Cal Newport’s discussions of “deep work” and “digital minimalism.” These particular lessons about focus, time, and energy management are vital for single parents; in the best of times, outsourcing childcare is also critical. But I will be honest, suggesting these resources also feels disingenuous. Five months into the pandemic, I am floundering when it comes to thinking about what my fall situation will look like—teaching, administrating, writing, raising my kids, helping them with remote learning, which might more accurately be called “homeschooling.” In the abstract, it’s easy to say that I will get up early, steal the first hour of the day (while my son watches television) for my own work. In practical terms, I know it’s unlikely to happen. I will need to prioritize what is easiest to ignore: taking care of myself. Doing those yoga poses. Eating well. It is easy enough to write this down; it will be far harder to take my own advice. Workaholism and self-reliance are hard to escape. Please understand: It got me where I am.

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## Morning, late July, in the Time of the Coronavirus

I have a text thread going with some other mother colleagues as we all begin to come to terms with another semester of online education for our children and online teaching for us. I'm walking and texting. Public schools have announced they are going online. How am I supposed to do my job? This is not a rhetorical question. I send a letter saying as much to our superintendent. I am fuming. When I say I have no childcare, I mean I have no childcare. If it is not safe—and it doesn't feel safe—to outsource childcare, which is already a privilege as a result of my social class, I have no one to rely on but me. This isn't tenable. I am dreading the winter, of being in close quarters, on never getting anything done. I am angry. I am sad. Dear Virginia Woolf, Dear Audre Lorde: What would you have me do?

There is a lesson in Juffer's analysis: We need to acknowledge that we are all domestic intellectuals who "give value to the work of mothering—to the pure organicity of birth, diaper changing, nursing; they are organic intellectuals who do not rank intellectual over bodily labor but rather live out of their convergence" (9). More than any other time, we cannot forget that we are bodies first.

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Beyond the pandemic, the problem is the neoliberal/corporate university. If Juffer's argument—made in 2006—points out the "highly individualized and isolating work practices of academia" (30), in this moment of COVID-19, this description is particularly true. Even as we are all literally isolated, videoconferencing with each other at home on our computers as we discuss this crisis of caregiving, our children themselves remain off camera, generally unseen. Thus, as we grapple with the self-reliance imposed by the neoliberal university, we mostly have to rely on ourselves, stuck as we all are in our own homes, with outsourcing childcare a literal danger.

If you are a single mother, it's a double or triple whammy. There is not space in this essay for a complete analysis (at one point this draft was literally double the expected length), so briefly, I want to say that because of these habits and this moment, both self-reliance and self-care are critical. They are not oppositional but deeply enmeshed. These are lessons, then, for all academics but particularly my fellow single mothers. For those who are not cared for by others in particular, self-care is not a luxury or a self-indulgence; as Audre Lorde reminds us, it is a fundamental necessity. To put a sharper point on it, Juffer suggests that self-care practices offer a stand in for the "lack of material and emotional support of mothering" (28).

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Woolf reminds us it is difficult to write if we have not dined well. This is, of course, literally true. It is also a broader synecdoche for taking care of oneself. Intellectual work depends on bodily wellbeing. Self-care is not in opposition to productivity and academic work. Repeat after me.

In this time, I am baking a lot with my son, which I can make pass as fraction work in our attempts at home schooling, but also it's just good to have a gluten-free brownie at the end of the day. I am trying to slow down. I am trying to remember that any number of words on a page is some number of words on a page and not to resent (compare to) what I might have done in some earlier ideal time. I am trying to tell myself that any intellectual work I do is a bonus. But it feels as necessary to me as air.

In writing this essay, I am also giving myself permission not to write except what feels critical right now. And, yes, writing about motherhood—trying to sort out this knot—feels critical.

Sometimes it takes looking at the world through the lens of a single mother to find your time (your privilege). Because here's the thing: At least in the immediate future, structural change is not coming. We're not suddenly going to have raises and subsidized childcare and material support for our work. Life is going to get harder and more complicated. So the following words are mostly notes to myself, so I can return to them in the fall, when things do indeed get harder and more complicated; if they help you, too, even better.

1. Count your blessings. Your health. Your children. Your house in the historic district. Whatever it is that you have that not everyone can count on. Count your blessings. Return to step one as often as you need to, minimally once a day.
2. Put on your oxygen mask first. What do you need to make it through the day? Expensive coffee? Adequate sleep? Exercise? Reasonably good food. Do these things. It is easy to eat junk food, and it may feel good to occasionally stay up late, but you will pay for it. It will make working the next day even harder. Take care of yourself.
3. Big rocks first. This is a cliché in time management circles, but it bears repeating. Triage your to-do list. Important things first. There will always be more email. Email begets email. If the most important thing is writing, if writing is the thing that will help you get a promotion and if writing is the thing that feeds your teaching and if writing feeds your soul, do it first. Then get to the other stuff. The other stuff will always be there. Some of the other stuff probably doesn't need to be done by you, or maybe not at all.
4. Say no. I will be frank: After years of saying yes, I am recognizing my particular vulnerability to “overwhelm” as a single mother.<sup>2</sup> I am short

on available verbs. All my caretaking energy is going to my children and my students, as well as my immediate family and friends. After a lifetime of being single, it is hard to admit the fault lines of self-reliance. Saying “no” is the most self-protective word to have in one’s arsenal.

5. What is your metaphorical or literal room? Do you need noise-cancelling headphones? Do you need to work in your car, garage, or tent in the yard? Do you need to get up early? (Staying up late rarely works, especially if you have small children; let’s get real.) What can you do during a walk? What can you do in the shower? Find your privacy. This is both intellectual and literal freedom.
6. Expand your network, however you safely can. Join forces. Begin a conversation.

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### **Morning, August 3—**

It is the end of summer. I am taking a class online to better prepare me to teach online. This week, the first time since March, my son is at camp—with his tie-dyed “coronavirus sucks” mask on—while I work. (Fingers crossed for no COVID-19, fingers crossed that he can stay there all week.) After the end of the first day, we are both exhausted, in the best ways. I did three blocks of deep work—one on this essay, one on a book project, and one on online teaching—plus a long, thinking walk while he was out of the house. (How much I can do with quiet! With childcare from someone who is trained to do it!) In my email today: a survey on school-day camp during the year to assist elementary schoolers with their online schooling as well as an invitation to join a homeschooling backyard micro-school pod. Neither of these possibilities feels right, but both are a recognition that we can’t do it alone. Married parents have more cushion than single ones, to be sure, but there’s also no question that this time that we find ourselves in is extraordinarily hard.

I have been prepping my course off and on, letting it simmer while I think about other things and take a walk. This is the question I want them to think about: How to make a creative life in a time of crisis? If writing has value (and I think it does), it needs to be supported by the behaviors that support it, such as sleep, food, and walks.

I do not have easy answers. In the midst of drafting this essay, my cohort of department mothers drafted a simple request to discuss caregiving responsibilities at our first faculty meeting of the year. Although asking for particular policies and solutions would have undoubtedly ruffled some feathers (who is included, who is excluded, who determines what is essential?) inviting frank conversations is a necessary first step towards any policy change. And

even though we know that anecdote is not data, personal narratives—like this—are also critical towards the work of imagining change. Although this virus is particularly challenging, the basic conflict between work and family and the heteronormative practices of academic labour has long existed in the university, as single parents are profoundly aware. I want to stress the importance of a true awareness of caregiving, as opposed to a rhetorical one. I want to stress that recognizing the needs of faculty parents can be understood as the first step towards acknowledging that all faculty have personal lives and families, whether or not they are traditionally defined. Like Juffer, I am optimistic that “bringing the domestic into the workplace will illuminate the heterogeneity of the domestic sphere” (110). More than this, in this era of the coronavirus, when even the workplace has literally entered into the domestic sphere, we could explore both more meaningful integration rather than a co-optation. The boundary needs to be not excluding the domestic from the workplace; work’s encroachment on the home must be resisted. Writing this essay, which is an analysis and a calling out, is a form of resistance. If we as humanists purport to value care, we need to first acknowledge the literal caregiving that operates in support of academic work.

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I close my Word document, put Lorde and Woolf back on my shelf until tomorrow, and open my office door. Brownies are cooling on the counter.

## Endnotes

1. Since I drafted this essay earlier in the summer, my college has made a more concerted effort to acknowledge the difficulties faced by academic parents through developing some guidelines and best practices, such as urging chairs to hold meetings in the afternoons as many local school districts are using mornings for synchronous learning. Most support remains rhetorical rather than material.
2. I borrow Brigid Schulte’s term “overwhelm” to characterize the psychological state that goes along with being overworked.

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CATHERINE MA

## Reflections of a Chinese Academic Mom Struggling to Survive a Pandemic

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*Each of us has been negatively affected by this pandemic, but mothers have had to shoulder the brunt of it, as they have been forced to work from home, provide child/elder care, and ensure that their family survives. Sadly, academic mothers have been burdened not only with an increased workload at home but also with trying to juggle their academic careers, which have been gravely affected by this pandemic. As a Chinese academic mother, I have struggled with managing my publishing requirements, my service to my department, and my online teaching responsibilities. I have had to care for elderly family members, who are more susceptible to COVID-19, and for my children, who have been exposed to COVID-19. I have also had to work through filial piety failures as a daughter and daughter-in-law. Sharing the struggles of academic mothers aims to expose how the exorbitant workload that falls upon academic mothers is not sustainable and to address systemic problems that have been long plagued both the academic and home environment. All mothers cannot continue to support a system or a government that lacks leadership during global crises that do not value the visible and invisible labor of mothers because women have far too long been viewed as disposable. In sharing my experiences during this pandemic as a Chinese mother and academic navigating through this uncharted territory of pandemic survival, I hope my journey can provide support to other academic mothers as we advocate for structural change in how mothers should be supported as essential workers.*

I am fortunate that my tenure began on September 1, 2020; it gave me some sense of security in an extremely tenuous 2020. Sadly, my untenured and adjunct colleagues fear for their jobs, as college enrollments have significantly fallen due to COVID-19 and an increasing number of colleges are furloughing faculty or not renewing their contracts (Kelderman). We have already seen how the pandemic has dramatically decreased the publication rates of female

faculty (Gabster et al 1969). Other colleges are cutting majors and persuading senior faculty to retire early in an attempt to balance their budget deficits (Smola). In the worst-case scenario, in which a college may close, even tenured faculty may find themselves jobless. An online colleague said it best when confronted with all this turmoil: “We are totally on the Titanic, but we’re the orchestra on the deck” (Adeoju). I am in my second year as an associate professor at a community college, which caters primarily to students of color, many of whom are immigrants and/or first-generation college students, just like me. Our campus is located in Brooklyn, New York, which was one of the pandemic hot spots. My primary duties are teaching a 4/4 load, which is quite heavy, as our classes prior to the pandemic were capped at forty-three and now at twenty-nine. I am also a researcher and had been working on a number of publications before the pandemic, but my thinking has become so fragmented making writing and revising extremely challenging. My publications are moving at a snail’s pace, but I’m grateful that I have been productive because my colleagues with young children are even more overwhelmed. After this round of publications has gone to print, I will have more than enough to apply for a promotion to full professor for 2022.

Other hats I wear include being a board member for the Asian American/Asian Research Institute of the City University of New York, a member of an advisory board to create a graduate level Asian American/Asian studies program, a mentor for our students through our college’s women’s center, a mentor for historically underrepresented junior faculty, and a rising scholar in diversity and antiracism work within the classroom. Doing this kind of work has its own issues, especially when the president of the United States (#45) has waged his war on diversity, equity, and inclusion (Flaherty). I know too many faculty of colour, myself included, who have been harassed and sent death threats because of the valuable work we do in this area, and these threats have only increased exponentially under #45’s administration.

I am also a mother of three, my daughter is a junior in college, and my sons are a freshman and junior in high school. They have all gone back to school this fall, and I worry about their exposure to COVID-19. My daughter chose to fly back to Minnesota for her classes, as she did not want to endure another online semester. I asked her many times to reconsider, but I know she’s an adult who makes good decisions. Both of their schools had an extensive COVID-19 testing policy before classes began, and they enforce social distancing and mask-wearing during classes. My sons’ high school will require all students to get the vaccine when it becomes available. These restrictions seem good on paper, but it’s difficult, if not impossible, to keep COVID-19 completely out of schools. My sons’ high school had a student who tested positive, and my younger son was a direct contact, so both he and my older son had to quarantine and get tested. My daughter’s college has weekly testing and

has had six cases since they opened in September. This concerns me greatly, but my husband says keeping COVID-19 rates less than 1 per cent is actually excellent. I prefer zero cases, but he tells me my view is unrealistic. I am grateful that my college opted for online teaching because I know other colleagues at different universities were incredibly stressed not knowing if they had to be back in the classroom during this global pandemic. Even as my college went online shortly after our spring semester had begun, there has never been any discussion should faculty or students become sick. It seems incredulous that our college does not have any contingency plans if faculty were to get sick or die while teaching during this pandemic. Maybe we are too afraid to address this potential outcome as if bringing up a contingency plan would make the terrifying outcome of faculty dying of COVID-19 all too real but deaths are already occurring. Within the biggest public university system in New York City, numerous faculty, administrators, and students have lost their lives to COVID-19 (Valbrun). I surely do not want my name listed on our college's memorial website.

As of October 2020, there have been over thirty-nine million global cases of COVID-19, 1.1 million global deaths, and those numbers increase each day (John Hopkins University and Medicine). It's not surprising that the United States leads the world in COVID-19 cases and deaths with over eight million cases and over 220,000 deaths; even still, #45 tweets, "Don't be afraid of COVID" (qtd. in Cooper). His cavalier attitude towards those who lost loved ones during this pandemic is callous and heartless. All these current issues leave me so fearful, as they underscore the lack of support for academic mothers during this pandemic. One week, the high school notified parents that a staffer tested positive, but my sons were not in direct contact and my daughter's college informed us that they had two positive cases on campus. My daughter told me that one of the cases is a volleyball player and now the volleyball pod must quarantine. She's on the softball team, and two of her friends were randomly selected to be tested. We both hope that they are negative, or their pod will have the same fate as the volleyball team. This is our new normal, and we'd be fooling ourselves to think that any school can stay negative for the academic year. I worry about my children and students for different reasons, and some days, I am overwhelmed with sadness because this is not normal. I'm not sure how long I can continue feeling this way but I do reach out to my friends who are both mothers and clinicians to help me sort things out. It's comforting in a year that started off well but quickly became a dumpster fire.

## COVID-19 Arrives in New York City

This year began rather uneventful as my husband and I, jetted off to the 2020 Hawaii International Conference on Education during the first week of January. It was a dream come true that my paper was accepted, and I received funding to present my research on teaching about race and discrimination in my favourite state at my favourite hotel. I barely noticed the passenger next to me who coughed and sneezed throughout the twelve-hour flight. Once we landed, we drove to our favourite poke place for lunch, and I prepared for my presentation while admiring the beautiful scenery from our ocean-front balcony. The day after my presentation, my husband caught a bad cold and was quite sick. I took him to see the hotel doctor who noticed that his oxygen levels were rather low and suggested giving him a steroid shot to help him feel better quicker. Luckily, he was well enough though still weak to fly back home. We didn't think much of it. Shortly after arriving home, we celebrated the year of the rat with a family dinner at our favourite restaurant in Brooklyn's Chinatown, which was packed with Chinese families also celebrating the Lunar New Year. Around this time, my cousin from Hong Kong sent me a message asking me to send her three hundred N95 masks. It seemed so odd that I thought someone had hacked into her social media account, but it turned out to be her, and she couldn't find these masks anywhere. I bought twenty-five boxes for her off eBay and an extra box for my family. Little did I realize how precious those N95 masks would become.

This was the start of COVID-19 for our family, as news trickled in about a novel virus making people extremely ill and unable to breathe. I ordered disinfectant wipes but received an email that the orders were cancelled, which had never happened before. The same happened for orders of bathroom tissue. I decided to return something at our local price club and pick up some wipes and bathroom tissue, but there were dozens of cars, and so much chaos in the parking lot that I just drove home. This was the beginning of the growing panic in New York City. My semester had just started in March, and my students kept asking me if we were going to cancel classes. I always replied, "No. Why would we do that?" but fewer and fewer students showed up to class. Then the faculty received an email stating that classes were moving online for the remainder of the semester, and we had five days to complete this transition. I wasn't too concerned, as I was quite savvy with navigating our online platform. What I did not anticipate was the increase in work while teaching online and that this would be a COVID-19 semester in which faculty and students would teach and learn under incredible stress and fears of death. Many of my students were afraid, stressed out, furloughed, and unable to afford their rent or food. They tried to get their schoolwork done while homeschooling their children, providing eldercare, or quarantining in unsafe

homes. My greatest concern that spring and this fall semester was their wellbeing.

In addition to dealing with my students, I had to figure out my home situation with the five of us needing to use the WiFi for work and classes. My sons were learning online, and my daughter was flying home from college. I deliberately told her to just pack her carry-on and laptop, and we would buy whatever she was missing from school once she came home. I wanted to avoid having her wait for her checked luggage in an international airport and told her to come directly to the pick-up area once she deplaned. I had seen on the news the massive crowds at some airports and wanted to minimize her exposure to other travelers. My youngest son was to graduate from eighth grade and upset to miss out on all the graduation festivities he had seen his older two siblings partake in. There would be no senior trip, senior night, senior BBQ, or postgraduation party. Being Chinese, I also have extended family responsibilities with my elderly parents and in-laws, who all share major health issues.

### **A New Normal**

At the chaotic start of quarantining with my husband, mother-in-law, and three children, I was solely responsible for securing food, which left me resentful. How did I get stuck with all the cooking and dishwashing? I knew my husband was working many more hours while working from home, as the boundaries between work and home life became blurred. His job is in finance, and trying to keep the billion-dollar company he works for afloat increased his workload twofold. If he and his team failed at this task, the entire company would go bankrupt and everyone would lose their job. He is also the primary breadwinner in our family, so his income pays for our daughter's private college tuition, our sons' private high school education, and the majority of our expenses. Being that he and I are both immigrants and first-generation college graduates, the ability to give our children the educational opportunities we never had access to is every immigrant's dream, especially with the emphasis on education in many Asian families. I still feel a twinge of guilt for the many years he supported me as I worked towards my doctoral degree and only brought in a pitiful adjunct's salary. Although there was a short time when I was the primary breadwinner, I still believe that the job which generates more income is more valuable. When I first became a mother, the biggest demon I had to battle was feeling that all the work I was doing as a mother was less valuable because it did not bring home a paycheck. As I've become wiser, I know to value the visible and invisible work of mothers, but pandemic survival has resurfaced some of those old feelings again. I did have a long talk with my husband about feeling overwhelmed, and he has really stepped up in doing an

equitable amount of the domestic labour now, which has made a big difference in managing my stress levels. In many ways, this pandemic has helped us work better as a team and taught me that I don't have to carry everything on my shoulders alone.

### **Failing at Filial Piety**

In some ways, I am learning ways to adapt, but in others, I feel as though I'm failing. Prior to the pandemic, when my husband and I were both working late, it was easy to order dinner, but now with safety concerns of restaurants and delivery staff, we can't take any chances of being infected with COVID-19. One area where I feel I am failing at is filial piety because I get annoyed when my elderly mother-in-law tries to help out but actually creates more work for me. One time, I left a bag of raw carrots to prepare for dinner, and while I went upstairs to get some work done, she chopped them all up into small pieces. Upon closer inspection, she haphazardly scraped them but didn't peel them completely, so I had to finish peeling them one tiny piece at a time. It took twice as long to redo all the carrots than if I had just prepared them myself. I know she has good intentions because she knows my husband and I are busy, but even though I tell her to stop, she still insists on helping. Sometimes, she will attempt to carry a huge stack of folded laundry upstairs, and I tell her to stop because I don't want her to fall down the stairs, which happened a few years back. She has shrunk my work clothes numerous times, which I find maddening because I tell her repeatedly to let me take care of my wash loads. But then I feel guilty for feeling angry and not living up to the idea of being a dutiful daughter-in-law and showing respect to my elders. In traditional Chinese families, the daughter-in-law has the least amount of power in the family and is often subjected to abuse by her mother-in-law, but mine treats me better than my own mother. Unfortunately, her helping drives me insane, and I hate feeling this way. I did redeem myself when my mother-in-law needed joss paper to celebrate the mid-autumn festival, and I was able to order online not only the joss paper but also mooncakes. We haven't ventured into any supermarket since March, and I have had all our groceries delivered, but most Asian grocery stores haven't embraced online shopping, making it difficult to purchase what we need as a Chinese family.

My parents have also contributed a great deal of stress in me because they are Trump supporters. After the increase in racially charged attacks against Asians and the unending racist rhetoric against all communities of colour, the dutiful daughter in me cannot understand why my parents continue supporting this tyrant. The researcher in me understands that their decision is based on their blind acceptance of the model minority myth, in which they believe that shedding their immigrant and Chinese status will secure them a prestigious

place in white American society. What they don't realize is that such acceptance is a fallacy, and they will always fall short in the eyes of white America. The traditional Chinese girl inside of me who seeks her parents' approval is often at war with the established academic, who is an invited lecturer and growing expert in diversity and equity. At times, I feel as though I've failed as an academic if I can't even convince my own parents of the evils of this racist president. My parents probably can't understand why I am showing such blatant disrespect to them after all the sacrifices they endured to bring us to America. Some may criticize me for failing to be a dutiful daughter, but I can no longer spend my time with people who support racism. The pandemic made me realize that this is my deal breaker, and for now, I don't see any recourse with my parents. I hope things will change in the future, but for now, I need to distance myself from them, and it greatly saddens me.

### **Offers I Couldn't Refuse**

Even with everything on my plate, I still wanted to continue with my prepandemic career goals because it offered me a positive distraction. This semester, our new chair asked me to be the psychology area coordinator. I felt I couldn't refuse because I had planned on going up for full professorship in 2022, and this would count as major service to the department. It entailed a heavy workload, but I wanted to impress our new chair who hopefully would advocate for me when I apply for promotion. In this new role, I often deal with male adjuncts emailing me to call them, and I have politely responded that I don't have time to chat on the phone but I can readily answer their questions via email when I have a few moments of downtime. I also prefer a paper trail to document our discussions. In speaking with the other academic area coordinator, who is also a mother, she mentioned how these male adjuncts demand an absurd amount of our time. I emailed this adjunct and explained to him that right now, my sons are quarantining, which means that there is an exorbitant amount of domestic work and that we all have to get tested for COVID-19. I also had pressing writing deadlines, grading to do for almost one hundred students, as well as my own homework for a workshop I was attending. I didn't have time to have a conversation with him. He still didn't get what I was saying and asked if later this week would be better for calling him. I bluntly emailed him to just email me his questions. The answer he was seeking could have been answered by our secretary. So far my work as area coordinator has shown our new chair how efficiently I get things done, which might have prompted him to ask me if he could put my name on the shortlist for the college-wide tenure and promotion committees. Again, I felt I could not decline, but I asked for some time to think it over because I knew it would be another huge commitment. Unfortunately, my single colleague had already

agreed to his request, which made me feel that I would not be viewed as a team player if I refused. Eventually, I agreed to his request because I did not want to derail my promotion. Luckily, I did not get chosen, which says a lot about the lack of diversity of these committees, but that is a fight for another non-pandemic day.

### **Instilling Change**

This pandemic has shown me how society needs to change their definition of mother to that of a valued and extremely essential worker. Mothers need to be compensated for their work in not only providing child or elder care but also upholding a critical part of the world's economic infrastructure. There is no other way to view mothers after this pandemic. They are among the first line of essential workers. Being that this is an election year in the United States, voters need to choose a president who values the work of mothers and will put more mothers in decision-making positions because a lot of this disregard for mothers is based on the lack of mothers involved in governance. I know that this is certainly the case for the United States, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of women in Congress (23.7 per cent), the Senate (26 per cent), and the House of Representative (23.2 per cent) (Center for American Women and Politics). In 2019, only twenty-six mothers were sworn in out of the four hundred and thirty-five representatives and one hundred senators, making them a measly 4 per cent. The saddest part was that this was lauded as historic with a record number of women in the 116th United States Congress (Zoll). Without more mothers in positions of power, it is impossible to institute real change in policies that affect mothers and children.

As an academic mother, I work to instill change in the classroom because what makes me a stellar professor stems from my maternal side. The care I show my children translates into the care I give to my students, who have struggled during this pandemic. Students know that my concern for them is genuine, as I give them flexible due dates, address their fears during another COVID-19 semester, and provide a safe space for them to disclose personal issues they may be facing during this scary time. A student emailed me in a panic that her biology professor required them to log into their online platform daily as attendance and asked if I followed that policy. She explained that being on the computer for hours makes her eyes tired and gives her migraines. My response was "I understand that this is a pandemic, and I feel that professors should be extra understanding and flexible because of all the added stress." She agreed and was grateful for my understanding of students' needs and situations. I've seen syllabi stating that no late work will be accepted, and this was after I sent an email to faculty to remind them that this is a pandemic semester and we should be flexible in deadlines. I've had students emailing me

about extensions because they have been feeling sick, caring for sick loved ones, homeschooling siblings, working extra hours, etc. I make sure I thank them for shouldering all these additional responsibilities and offer every extension they need to survive another pandemic semester.

These safety nets I've put into place show them that I care about not only their academics but also their psychological health. These abilities come from my power of being a mother. Since many of our students are mothers, I assigned the article "Trying to Function in the Unfunctionable: Mothers and COVID-19" (O'Reilly) to help them recognize motherwork as essential to not only our families but also our economy. I asked students to devise ways to help mothers during the pandemic but had to remind many to think bigger and consider government programs to create high-quality and affordable childcare as well as other programs that help mothers in their day-to-day lives. I also teach my students about satellite babies, whereby Chinese immigrant parents often send their infants back to China to be cared for by grandparents, since the cost of childcare in the United States is astronomical (Schweitzer). I want my students to understand the impact of childcare and how this pandemic with the ensuing closure of schools has devastated working mothers in numerous ways. The combination of school closures and working from home has highlighted the lack of a safety net for many working mothers and sheds light on the need to have mothers be an integral part of decision-making strategies in policy making for both short-term COVID-19 survival plans and long-term postpandemic policies. Hopefully, these discussions will lead to structural changes in how mothers are viewed in our society.

I have always tried to teach about topics I am passionate about. Ever since the 2016 United States election, I knew I had to channel my rage from hearing the increasingly hateful rhetoric directed at immigrants, so I decided to create a course focusing on the psychology of immigration. This gave me a much-needed outlet, as I taught students about institutional and structural racism, cultural genocide in residential schools, and the lived experiences of immigrants trying to survive in America while dispelling common misconceptions about immigrants and immigration. Guest speakers who are immigrants came to give my classes a firsthand experience of their struggles and resilience. As a researcher, I've taken what I learned from teaching this course and presented and published on ways to create a curriculum that centres on diversity and inclusion. This work is critical in challenging the constant hateful rhetoric of #45, but the pandemic brought it to a halt. I realized that teaching such heavy topics while trying to ensure my own family's safety was too much work for me. I chose to preserve my own sanity and temporarily put on hold a class that I love to teach. Since our students often do not have access to their own WiFi or laptops, our college recommended that faculty teach asynchronously to accommodate their needs, which made teaching topics such

as xenophobia, discrimination, and racism all the more challenging because I could not gauge their facial expressions and body language as I did while in the classroom. Without a face-to-face setting, it was difficult to help students unpack these topics asynchronously, and when we had to move abruptly online, the students in my immigration class didn't have me to address their misunderstandings in real time. The class discussions were often the most essential part of helping students dissect these heavy topics. I could have revamped this class to be more compatible with an online setting, but I was just too mentally exhausted with dealing with surviving this pandemic while trying to make sense out of a world that seemed to be spiraling out of control.

Each day, I grow angrier at the toxic leadership in the United States that has led to so many preventable deaths and a steep rise in hate crimes against Asian communities (Tessler, Choi, and Kao 638). I am irate that academic mothers publish less than male academics because we carry the added responsibilities of helping our families and students survive this pandemic (Collins 9). Many colleges propose pausing the tenure clock, but this suggestion ignores the systemic gender divide, in which male colleagues publish at a higher rate than their female counterparts during this pandemic (Scheiber). I feel for all those mothers who lost loved ones from COVID-19, missed out on their children's milestones, homeschooled their children, are undocumented and endured the bulk of pandemic fatalities, put themselves and their families at risk every day as essential workers, had to choose between work and their children, and suffered sleepless nights riddled with worry and dread (O'Reilly 13-17; Correal and Jacobs). I worry for all the children who returned to school this fall because no school has successfully reopened without an uptick in COVID-19 cases (Hubler and Hartocollis). As a mother, it would destroy me if my children were to get sick, and I would die second guessing myself if letting them assert their independence to return to school was the right decision. I have never witnessed so many people who are science deniers and continually disregard the recommendations of national health experts. I have lost many hours of writing while researching ways to keep my family safe. I am also mentally drained providing support to students who have lost family members to COVID-19 and trying to alleviate their fears. Every semester while we wait for a vaccine will be another COVID-19 semester with the same fears and anxieties. My students have lost out on having a caring professor teach them face-to-face, and I have missed out on mentoring my students who are primarily immigrant and first-generation college students. Many of them may not be able to financially recover from this pandemic and will have to drop out of college. How does one put a price on that loss? This pandemic has brought to light so many issues that do not have any readily available solutions other than the fact that mothers and academic mothers need more support.

## Conclusion

Some days I worry that it will take time before I am able to teach face-to-face in the way I did prior to this pandemic and that frightens me. Have my abilities to interact with people in a face-to-face manner atrophied with a year of asynchronous teaching and Zoom meetings? I may need some time to reestablish myself once we are allowed back in the classroom. This pandemic has devastated so many lives and forced us to open our eyes to numerous injustices that have plagued academia regarding the disproportionate challenges academic mothers continue to shoulder. We need college-wide contingency plans to address the impact of the lack of childcare on our careers as well as how to continue teaching should we contract COVID-19, instead of sheepishly sending my login and password to a trusted colleague to grade my classes. I often think of Professor Paola De Simone, who passed out during her Zoom class meeting and later died of COVID-19, leaving behind a young daughter (Firozi and Farzan). This pandemic has shown us that we cannot continue sacrificing our mental and physical health anymore. Faculty also need guidelines on how to support students who get sick or have lost loved ones. These are much needed short-term discussions, but we also need to have institutional conversations pertaining to tenure guidelines. The standards of tenure have remained the same for decades and that should be a cause for alarm because the world has drastically changed since only white men were allowed in academia. It would be utterly irresponsible to ignore these issues in a postpandemic society. I hope college administrators will apply the existing research on academic mothers during this pandemic to create supportive institutional policies to address these inequities and provide a safety net for their faculty who are mothers. Perhaps this revelation will spark global changes for all universities moving forward. As we struggle to survive this pandemic, many unfortunate truths have been revealed, and now it is our duty to hold the people we vote into power accountable as we work together to find solutions in addressing these truths. We surely need more women and mothers in positions of power so they can create laws to address the inequities that continue to plague our society, but allies who are not mothers also need to step up and provide their support because the responsibility for change cannot fall only on our shoulders. Lastly, I hope that Chinese academics mothers who deal with contentious and complicated family dynamics can learn ways to appease their filial piety responsibilities while staying true to themselves. Maybe there is a way to create a bridge between the myriad of hats I must wear—those of an academic, a mother, and a dutiful daughter.

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## Academic Single Mothering during a Pandemic

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*Mothering during the pandemic has crystallized the preexisting gender gap in academia. Whereas previous studies have shown that women with children are significantly less likely to achieve full professorship than their childless or male peers, recent studies have already found evidence of a gender gap in productivity during the pandemic and several articles have been published on this topic by academic mothers struggling with having to juggle childcare, homeschooling, and academic duties from home. However, these papers and studies focus on partnered academic mothers, further exacerbating the invisibility of single mothers. Using my own experience as a single mother to five-year-old twin boys who left an American university for an Australian one during the pandemic, along with experiential accounts by other single academic mothers from the Facebook group “Single Parents in Academia,” this chapter highlights the specific challenges faced by single mothers during COVID-19 in a transnational context, both in and outside of academia. It also suggests avenues for solutions and improved policies to mitigate the single motherhood double penalty through a comparison of the lockdown regulations across three countries (France, the United States, and Australia). Its goal is to give visibility to single mothering, which has been further marginalized by the pandemic and its accompanying media discourse and emergency measures.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has crystallized many gender, class, and race gaps in mothering practices and widened the preexisting gender gap in academia. Whereas previous studies have shown that women with children are significantly less likely to achieve full professorship than their childless or male peers (Santos and Dang Van Phu; National Center for Education Statistics’ Fall 2018 Survey; Turner Kelly; Exley and Kessler; Guarino; Flaherty), recent studies have already found evidence of a gender gap in productivity during the pandemic (Frederickson; Flaherty). Several articles have been published on this topic by academic mothers struggling to juggle

childcare, homeschooling, and academic duties from home (Staniscuaski et al.; Supiano; Pettit).

However, these papers and studies focus on partnered academic mothers, further exacerbating the invisibility of single mothers. Being a single parent during a pandemic has its own set of challenges. For instance, getting groceries can become nearly impossible when you have more than one child and a COVID-19 law states that only one adult and one child per family may enter a store at any given time, and all delivery slots are full for the next three weeks. It does not help either when a university webinar meant to give practical advice to academic mothers during the pandemic mainly recommends dividing up childcare equally with one's partner. Now, with the closure of schools, mothers have to add homeschooling their children as a third shift to their daily load.

This chapter argues for the (re)inscription of single mothers into both the academic and general mothering discourses and aims to counter single academic mothers' invisibility during the pandemic. I contend that the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of aggravating the preexisting dire state of things, should highlight that more can, and should, be done to bridge the gender gap created by the single motherhood penalty in institutions of higher learning, which paradoxically promote inclusive ideals. This chapter's goal is to give some visibility to single academic mothering, which has been further marginalized by the pandemic and its accompanying discourse. In so doing, I will first argue that this invisibility is currently perpetuated by the publication market around this topic; then, I will delve into the single academic motherhood double penalty, as exposed by members of the Facebook support group "Single Parents in Academia" (hereafter abbreviated as SPA), and describe the specific circumstances to which they are subjected during the shelter-in-place orders. Finally, I will seek to offer practical ways of implementing less discriminatory policies. To this end, I will draw a comparison by highlighting the specific challenges faced by single mothers during COVID-19 in a transnational academic context and will use my own experience as a single mother to five-year-old twin boys having left an American university for an Australian one at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of experiential accounts drawn from single academic mothers' online contributions (through the aforementioned Facebook group) and from my own experiences will serve to sketch avenues for solutions and improved policies to mitigate the single motherhood double penalty. A cross-cultural comparison of the lockdown regulations across three countries (France, the United States [U.S.], and Australia) and of the social and academic support available to single mothers will, thus, help reframe the American response to the pandemic and point to avenues for urgent improvement.

## Recent Publications on Single Parenting during a Pandemic: A Review of Scarcity

Although single parenting—especially single mothering—remains overall invisible in the media, the pandemic seems to have started countering this invisibility with a few recent publications on the topic. However, the fact that these sparse studies and essays have appeared in peripheral venues still speaks to the marginalization of single mothering, as major publications, such as the *New York Times*, still focus on partnered mothers. In “Single Moms and COVID-19: Lessons in Desperation and Strength,” sociologist and former single mom Marika Lindholm discusses the specific challenges that the current pandemic poses for the eight million single mothers in the U.S. due to the inadequacy of the available political, economic, and social support. She focuses on the four main fears expressed by single mothers on various Facebook groups during the health crisis: the fear of becoming so sick that they will not be able to care for their children anymore; the fear of coparents who have been practicing less strict prevention and distancing measures and who may compromise their children’s health during visitation times; the fear of losing work because their children are home; and the fear of not being able to house and feed their children. Lindholm is also the founder of the social platform ESME (Empowering Solo Moms Everywhere), whose goal is to create a social movement of solo mothers.

Another attempt at rendering visible single mothers’ struggle during the pandemic can be found in “Single Parenting during the Coronavirus Crisis,” subtitled “Strategies for Managing when you’re going it alone,” in which Juliann Garey, a journalist, novelist, and clinical assistant professor at NYU, gives a bullet list of practical advice to help alleviate the mental and physical impact of the pandemic isolation on single parents. Although some of her suggestions can be useful, such as “Find your village” or “Get ahead of behaviour issues,” some of her other points are somewhat problematic and unrealistic for single academic mothers working at American universities. For instance, “Talk to your employer about taking some family medical leave or have a conversation about how to arrange flex time or how to consolidate work tasks during times that are going to align with what your child needs.” As many universities require synchronous remote teaching and meetings, this is hardly achievable. Furthermore, using a timer to let your child know when you should not be disturbed is bound to fail when you have a baby or more than one preschooler at home. Lastly, Garey’s longest entry, titled “Start with acceptance,” recommends resorting to the mindfulness concept of “radical acceptance” to acknowledge one’s lack of control of the situation. Her injunction to learn to let go of expectations is certainly healthy in the short term but is bound to cost dearly to single mothers’ academic advancement;

moreover, accepting an essentially unfair situation is unlikely to promote structural changes in the long run.

In “The Invisibility of the Single Parent during COVID-19,” Toronto-based actress, writer, and singer Athena Reich, who is also a single mother by choice of two young children, argues that single mothers’ exclusion from society during the pandemic has set them back to the sexist climate of the 1950s. She points to the inequity of emergency policies that do not prioritize single parents when daycare centers finally reopen after the lockdown as well as work-from-home arrangements that do not take into account the physical predicaments of sole care providers to young children. Even taking her ten-month-old daughter to the hospital for a COVID-19 test became fraught with challenges when she was told that she would not be allowed to bring her four-year-old sister along. As the second wave of the pandemic is now hitting the Northern Hemisphere, with new lockdown policies and no end in sight to the restrictive measures, this new world order does raise worrying questions about women’s rights and the impact of the lack of childcare options.

Finally, in the “Career” column of *Nature*, an article titled “How I Managed my Work and Personal Life as a Sole Parent during a Pandemic,” academic mama Antica Culina recounts how she left the Netherlands just before the lockdown started, to travel and stay with her parents in Croatia. She discusses the four steps that have helped her alleviate the stress of this extraordinary time: taking time to cope with the stress through pleasurable activities, such as playing the piano; prioritizing and setting daily goals; asking for support; and connecting with those in similar situations. In the last instance, she highlights how a Facebook support group has helped her retain a feeling of connectedness during the lockdown, which, for many single mothers, has meant losing their usual support network and the community they had painstakingly built prior to the pandemic. These four articles are the only ones I have been able to find that focus solely on single mothering during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Antica’s piece is the only one dealing with academic single mothering, amid the hundreds of articles on parenting during a pandemic that have flooded the internet and more traditional publication venues over the past seven months. As a member of the same Facebook support group mentioned by Antica, I now focus on the specific challenges encountered by single academic mothers during the pandemic, as recorded through various posts and testimonies in this group. Since it is a private group, I have asked the posters for permission to quote their posts before writing this article.

## Challenges and Solutions: A Case Study of an Online Support Group

Although academic single mothers can appear to be rather privileged when they hold tenure-track or tenured appointments, heralded as the holy grail of job security, their struggles and predicaments are, nonetheless, similar to those of nonacademic single mothers. Furthermore, being an academic does not necessarily entail belonging to a privileged social class, since many academic single moms suffer from precarious employment as adjuncts without any benefits. Even though I was not able to find exact statistics about single mothers' academic employment (which, again, testifies to single academic mothers' invisibility), if being a mother is the strongest predictor of non-tenured employment, then being a single mother is bound to throw additional hurdles on the path to career advancement. In the absence of studies devoted to single academic mothers during the pandemic, looking at an online support group for single mothers in academia provides a valuable case study of the many challenges facing single academic mothers in the wake of COVID-19 as well as potential solutions.

The private SPA Facebook group, administered by Eliane Boucher, has 622 members (as of November 17, 2020) and averages eight new posts a day. Despite the generic term "parents" in the title, it is worth noting that there is no academic single father among its members. At what seemed to be the height of the pandemic (i.e., from March to June 2020), the group was an invaluable source of support for many of us single academic mothers, as it provided a virtual village to palliate the loss of our usual support networks brought about by the lockdown. It offered a safe and supportive space for venting when daily struggles became too unbearable or for seeking advice on how to cope with being locked down with two active toddlers while being required to teach synchronously through Zoom and attend virtual meetings. Compared with another Facebook group for academic mothers, named "Academic Mamas" and comprised of 11,048 members (as of November 17, 2020), the SPA group has consistently been a nonjudgmental, private venue for sharing the specific concerns of single mothers in academic careers. In the "Academic Mamas" group, seemingly innocent posts, such as "should I mention being a mother in my tenure-track job application?" tend to generate heated debates and normative comments revolving around issues, such as breast-feeding vs. bottle feeding or hiring a fulltime nanny. Such comments presuppose being in a heterosexual partnership and draw a divisive line between privileged academic mothers (i.e., white, able-bodied, and healthy women employed in permanent positions, with supportive husbands and extended families) and the less privileged groups.

When discussing the SPA group members' predicaments, I will be using pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. The seven women that will be the focus of

this study are those who have kindly accepted to share their experience for this article. They are also representative of the demographic of the group: six of these women are in academic positions while mothering children under the age of thirteen, while the seventh one left academia recently after being denied tenure. At the time of the interview, four of the women were tenured, one was working as an adjunct, and a sixth one was one on the tenure track. These women ranged in age from thirty-six to fifty-four years. Five of them are Caucasian; one is Latina, and one is African American. One woman was in a heterosexual coparenting relationship with her former partner, one was a single-parenting widow, one was a single mother by choice, one was divorced and the primary custodial parent, and one had sole legal and physical custody of her child. One woman had three children; one had two children, and the other five women had one child each. One of the children had serious developmental challenges. One of the women experienced chronic illness. These women represent a range of disciplines and institutions: two from science and engineering, two from social sciences and education, and one from the humanities. These seven single academic mothers who represent a diversity of situations encountered among single academic parents are as follows: Eliane, Karen, Kathryn, Polly, Jessie, Gemma, and Melissa.

Since March 2020 and the shift to online teaching, members of the group have reported various additional obstacles negatively affecting single academic mothers' ability to perform their work. These obstacles include the following: children being barred from campus (rendering it impossible, in one instance, for an academic mother to access her books and pedagogical materials in her office, as she had no one else to take care of her children); being requested to attend Zoom meetings at inconvenient times, when children need to be fed; and, in a few instances, being explicitly told by one's department chair to make sure that children are not seen or heard during a Zoom meeting.

Most group contributors emphasize the added mental and physical load brought about by the pandemic, as exemplified by Eliane (a divorced mother to two little boys)'s statement that "Since March 23 [2020], like all single parents, I've been playing mom, full-time employee, kindergarten and third-grade teacher, chef, and maid with no one else to tag in." Her situation summarizes the situation encountered by most single parents during the pandemic: childcare centers and schools are closed, and regardless of budgetary constraints, it is not possible to hire a babysitter or nanny due to stay-at-home and social distancing orders.

As a logical consequence of this added load, most academic single mothers in the Facebook group also report the extreme feelings of loneliness caused by being in lockdown with children and having no other adult to talk to. Moreover, academic careers usually require moving away from one's family and friends because of job scarcity, which also makes the perspective of

becoming sick all the more worrying. Kathryn (a divorced mom of a special needs teenager, who herself suffers from a chronic pain condition) comments about a friend who has quarantined with her husband and how it has helped her so much to have another adult to sit down and talk to every night. Kathryn, though, does not have such a luxury: “I have no other adult to talk to, to help take out the garbage, or make dinner, or monitor the homework, or come up with creative ideas of fun things to do together. My son and I are so tired of talking to each other.” The lockdown has, thus, crystallized the isolation that comes with both single mothering and the academic career, which, in pre-pandemic time, could be compensated with a circle of friends or various social activities.

This feeling of utter isolation has been worsened by the emergency response and rules: 100 per cent of SPA members note how most COVID-19 guidelines are geared towards partnered mothers, exacerbating the preexisting invisibility of single mothers from public discourse and policy. Kathryn, who at some point developed an illness with similar symptoms to COVID, explains the following:

All the instructions for how to manage COVID at home assume another adult is there. When I got sick, I stayed in my room as much as I could, but I could not isolate completely. My son managed to feed himself with frozen pizza and snacks and sandwiches, but I had to get my own tea and clean up after myself, and it was exhausting. I made arrangements with a friend that if I got so sick and had to be hospitalized, they would take him. But they hesitated. It meant possibly exposing their family. We agreed that if it came to that, he could stay in their guest house, where they could take care of him, but also keep themselves safe.

Kathryn’s statement highlights the glaring omission of public discourses and an emergency response that fails to include single parent households, creating extreme stress and desperation for both parent and children.

For SPA members whose position involves high research expectations, finding time for research proves even more challenging than delivering remote teaching. Most single academic moms in the Facebook group report having given up on all screen time limits for their children and having had to adjust their definitions of “productivity,” according to the extraordinary situation. Polly, a single mother by choice of three, notes that the lockdown has been particularly challenging, as it has meant being stuck indoors with her three young children, without any possibility to find relief. Whenever she voices her exhaustion, she feels stigmatized by being implicitly or openly reminded by her relatives and friends that she chose to be a single mother. She writes: “I’m realizing I have too much on my plate.... I spent the day surviving with the

three kids indoors today again; winter is still hanging on here, which makes the days isolating so much longer. Such a struggle getting university work done and holding everything together here with the kids.” Most SPA members, like Polly, report that COVID-19 has exacerbated the daily struggles they experienced before the pandemic, such as having to cut down on their sleep hours to get work done. Here, “work” mostly refers to teaching preparation and grading and some administrative tasks, since working on research has been turned by the pandemic into a rare privilege of the childless or partnered academics.

In addition to the various issues already listed, single academic mothers of children with special needs have experienced additional struggles during the lockdown, although it is probably no different from most single parents to special needs children, whether they are academics or not. Gemma says the following: “Last year, my son was diagnosed with ADHD and anxiety.... He ... can be extremely challenging; his socio-emotional development lags behind his intellectual development by several years.” The day before it was announced that schools would be closed for the rest of the academic year, Gemma finally heard that her son would be getting special help, which, of course, has been put to a stop. Although a few SPA members describe a kind of honeymoon period when schools and campuses closed and they were granted an extra week after spring break to switch to remote teaching, once the school started assigning work, things started to change. As Gemma explains, “The anxiety associated with evaluated work, coupled with deadlines, are things that do not work well for a nontypical kid.” Overall, SPA members’ experiential accounts reveal the precariousness of the single academic mother’s pre-COVID-19 life, whose collapse the lockdown has precipitated. As many posts and discussions by partnered academic mothers on the “Academic Mamas” group have revolved around the impossibility of retaining academic productivity while caring for children during the lockdown, one can only hope that the pandemic may eventually increase awareness of the impossible demands made on single academic mothers in non-COVID-19 times.

However, the pandemic has, for some SPA members, had a bit of an upside, which could pave the way for some (limited) solutions. For instance, Eliane and a few other single academic mothers point out that quarantine has paradoxically brought them more alone time because their custody schedule has shifted to closer to a fifty-fifty summer schedule thanks to school closure. If family courts could push more strongly towards implementing shared custody whenever possible and urge fathers to remain equally involved as mothers are in their children’s upbringing, some single academic mothers’ fates would be vastly improved. To many academic mothers who are 100 per cent solo, either by choice or because of a former partner who has relinquished his parental duties, having a few childless days or weeks at regular intervals

can sound like a dream. However, it also comes with a whole other set of worries. As Eliane says:

The uncertainty about whether sending your kids off to their other parent right now might mean you don't see them for a much longer time than anticipated. We've had to worry about travel from the state I live in, to the state my sons' dad lives in, being cut off. Will they be able to travel back home? We also have to worry about what happens if one of us, or the boys, starts to show symptoms.

So, while having a coparent with whom to share some of the parenting burden during the pandemic may seem like a welcome relief, it can also come with its added set of stressors.

Furthermore, coparenting during the pandemic brings a new set of challenges, as several academic moms report the added difficulty of having to negotiate school decisions with a coparent who may not agree, such as sending the children back to school or choosing the online homeschooling option, when such a choice is possible. Eliane had to get lawyers involved when her ex-husband refused to compromise. Another stressful aspect of the pandemic for single mothers who share custody with an ex lies in the risk of exposure at the other parent's house, with a lack of open communication resulting in uncertainty about how many people the children are being exposed to during the stay-at-home orders. Yet for some single academic moms who usually share custody with a coparent, the pandemic has meant shifting to having the children all the time for various reasons. For instance, Kathryn reports the following:

My son's father is a physician who works in the ER.... When the hospitals here started seeing COVID patients, we moved my son to my house full-time. Our assumption at that point was that his dad would either be working overtime, exhausted, sick, or quarantined due to possible exposure....We didn't discuss specifics; we just knew this is what we had to do, and it wasn't safe for our son to be at his dad's house anymore. We planned that they would see each other for outdoor, at-a-distance activities when possible, but we didn't know if that would be once a week or once in three months.

She also highlights an unexpected turn brought about by the extraordinary situation, in that she now must depend on her former partner, with whom she has "a really complicated relationship," to do her grocery shopping and errands. She talks about the uncertainties regarding the lack of guidelines for when it is safe for healthcare workers to spend time with their children and at what kind of a physical distance. Kathryn points out the following: "We have a lot of tension around that, which I expect will only get worse if this goes on for

six months, a year, two years. Will my son ever have a normal relationship with his dad again? Will his dad continue to be safe and healthy?”

One aspect that the pandemic has definitely highlighted is that the notion of work-life balance is a myth for mothers, especially single ones. In academia, before the pandemic, it was hard to maintain a separation between work and family life, since meeting publication deadlines, preparing for class, and grading more often than not have to happen on the weekend or at night after the children are in bed. Single academic moms of young children seem to be struggling the most with the conflicting demands of home schooling and teaching remotely, as children under a certain age cannot realistically be expected to entertain themselves for more than a few minutes at a time and cannot remain focused on their online classes without adult supervision, which is expected to happen at the same time as their mothers' working hours. Karen (a widowed mom to a preteen boy) describes her lockdown with her preteen son as follows: “The two of us navigate homeschooling while I'm trying to manage a pretty large (twenty-plus faculty members) department, teaching a graduate seminar via Zoom, and keeping my sanity.” Even though older children can be relatively more self-reliant, the mental load of having to juggle children's homeschooling schedule and making sure they do not fall behind, while also working full time, is recurrently described as taking a toll on single mothers' mental health. Karen adds: “I think about [my son] and other kids of academics that they are more likely to be ‘okay’ than those families who are truly struggling. I think I'm struggling but recognize that I'm super fortunate right now.” This acknowledgment of relative privilege among less fortunate single mothers is a recurring motive in SPA posts and comments.

Most of the stress reported in the SPA group ultimately arises from universities not acknowledging the impossible situation in which single mothers find themselves, as a result of the conflicting demands of having to care for their children and homeschool them full-time while continuing to work full-time. In practice, the switch to remote teaching has often meant working more than full-time, since countless extra hours have had to be devoted to urgently redesigning classes meant for face-to-face teaching. When asked if her college is supportive of parents, Melissa (a single mother of a twelve-year-old boy and a teacher at a small liberal arts college) answers:

At best, I think [my university is] negligent in that regard. They have not been particularly accommodating of school pickup times when scheduling faculty meetings, for example, and when taking applications to be able to teach remotely this semester, childcare was not one of the accepted criteria. There are very few single parents on my campus, though, so for many of them, it is not an issue because the spouse takes care of that. We do have maternity leave, but I do not think it is paid unless you have accrued sick days enough to cover it. I

am also pretty much forced to do Saturday events once a month, and there were evening events in my early years there, and that was a huge challenge. I have eschewed as many evening events as I can because of childcare issues, although now I can do them more because my son is old enough to stay by himself.

Yet some single academic moms have been able to see some silver linings to the pandemic, such as Kathryn's remark: "There is so much to be grateful for. My son's school has done really well with Zoom classes. We have a comfortable house and plenty of food.... The slower pace at home is so much better for my body, and everything going online means that I now have access to all kinds of things that I would have been too exhausted to get to in person." So, for minority groups, such as those single academic moms suffering from chronic illness, disability, or ill health, no longer having to commute and to perform professional duties face-to-face can be experienced as a relief. Or, in cases of troubled teenagers, the lockdown can alleviate ongoing worries, as another group member, Jessie, a single mom of a ten-year-old son, reports:

This period has been mixed for us. In some ways, things are so much easier. I don't worry about him [her son] getting in trouble at school. We spend more time doing cool stuff together.... But I am so tired. Even though it has always been just the two of us and I have to do all the things all the time, it just feels so much harder now. [Yet] I am incredibly fortunate. We are both introverts, so the isolation isn't that hard. He is old enough to keep himself occupied for hours reading or looking up nerdy stuff online. I still have a job. I can work from home. We are both healthy. We have counselling support either online or by phone regularly.

From this perspective, the pandemic can also provide an opportunity for single academic mothers to live a slower-paced life and spend more time with their children. One of the upsides of the pandemic noted by many is certainly the ability to take part in an increased number of major international conferences, since the switch to online venues has removed the financial and logistic headaches of organizing childcare for several days in a row during conference travel, which is usually an important barrier to single academic mothers' career advancement. So, overall, although the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown have exacerbated single academic mothers' feelings of invisibility and marginalization—along with their daily struggles to meet the research, service, and teaching expectations required for promotion and career advancement—the few silver linings that are emerging have started to pave the way for improved policies, which will be the focus of the next section.

## **Urgent Avenues for Improved Policies in the Wake of COVID-19: A Transnational Comparison.**

So far, we have seen some of the ways in which the pandemic has crystallized and exacerbated preexisting issues for academic mothers in the U.S., especially single mothers. Based on the posts discussed above from the SPA Facebook group—along with articles published in mainstream media in Europe, Australia, and the U.S.—academic single mothers in the U.S. seem to have been, by far, the most severely impacted by the pandemic. This is no surprise, as it comes in the wake of a complete lack of a decent family policy, as my pre-pandemic experience at an American university revealed. A cross-cultural comparison of the social and academic support available to single mothers before and during the pandemic can, thus, help reframe the U.S. response (or lack thereof) and point to avenues for urgent improvement.

As I now move on to a more autobiographical perspective, let me briefly introduce myself: I am a single mother of five-year-old twin boys, who is originally from France and recently moved from the U.S. to Australia to take up a new position at the University of Sydney amid the pandemic. Since my sons' birth five years ago, we have spent, overall, two years in France, one of those years being a leave without pay that I had to take because of the lack of paid maternity leave at my former U.S. institution. Even though I was privileged to be an assistant professor on the tenure track at a major research university, there was just no paid maternity leave in 2015 at that institution. As I needed to spend the last few weeks of the pregnancy on strict bed rest (and, later, in hospital) and because the babies were born prematurely, which entailed a lengthy stay in the NICU and a series of health issues during their first year, it was not possible for me to just continue working normally. To stop the tenure clock and prevent my temporary lack of research productivity from having a negative impact on my tenure case, I was offered a leave of absence at a time when I would have needed money the most. I am aware that this is still a privilege, as many less fortunate young mothers without job security would have lost their employment if they had had to be away for so long.

This transnational motherhood adventure has put me in a privileged position to experience and compare maternal policies across the three countries where we have lived: France, the U.S., and Australia. The amount of support I received from the French government, through various social policies aimed at increasing the country's birth rate, was beyond what I could have expected and stands in stark contrast with what is available to single mothers (and mothers in general) in the U.S. It involved, among other benefits, eight weekly hours of free home help with childcare and house chores during the first twelve months of the babies' lives, weekly home visits by a pediatric nurse, virtually free daycare centres, and school (*école maternelle*) starting at two and a half years

old and running from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., with inexpensive after-school care until 6:45 p.m. The onset of the pandemic, thus, came as a shock to French parents, since daycare centres and schools had to close during the strict lockdown, which took place from 17 March to 11 May 2020 (Charrel). By contrast, in the U.S., the pandemic has only highlighted preexisting pitfalls of American family policy, since even in pre-pandemic times, having a career and a family was already a struggle for most women. The closure of daycare centers, preschools, and schools for an indefinite length of time in most U.S. states in the wake of COVID-19 has created conundrums and major obstacles for women, setting them back to half a century ago, when they had to struggle to maintain a career while having children. Now, eight months into the pandemic, the gap between academic mothers and their childless or partnered peers has only widened in terms of research productivity (Frederickson; Flaherty; Staniscuaski; Supiano; Pettit). The situation in France has not been much better, with the difference that various provisions are made by the government to palliate, through subsidies, defective fathers who shun their financial and visiting duties. Those subsidies (for instance, the *Allocation de Soutien Familial* paid to single parents by the *Caisse d'Allocations Familiales*) has helped some single academic mothers hire babysitters. However, like nearly everywhere, some single mothers in France have reported being unable to do basic grocery shopping due to entrance to supermarkets and stores being restricted to one child per adult<sup>1</sup>—a policy that displays complete ignorance of single parents' predicaments. However, the strict lockdown orders only lasted for two months there, and schools and daycare centers have now reopened, unlike in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> And despite the new lockdown implemented in France on October 30 2020, daycare centers and schools will now remain open, as they are deemed essential services. In contrast, in my former state of Hawai'i, the Honolulu school where my children would have started kindergarten has been closed since March.

Overall, I can say that I lucked out by moving to Australia amid a pandemic because schools never completely closed in my home city of Sydney. Even at the height of the pandemic, my children were able to continue attending school in person because unlike what was happening in France and other European countries, the definition of “essential workers” included single-parent households, insofar as a single parent cannot afford not being able to work. As this is a rapidly evolving situation, Sydney may be headed to another, stricter lockdown. However, even if schools and childcare possibilities closed completely, my university offers the option of taking a fully paid carer's leave<sup>3</sup>—as do most employers in Australia—which would make the situation manageable.

So far, in Australia, I have mostly been in awe at the fact that my situation as a single mother of two is not only taken into consideration but valued. For

instance, having remained productive (as far as research and publications are concerned), despite such heavy caring responsibilities, is recognized as an asset, and I can apply for one of the university's equity prizes granting awardees a full year of teaching relief to focus on their research and receive targeted mentoring to advance their careers. I can also apply to prestigious early career research grants because, even though I received my PhD more than five years ago, I get to take off two years per child, three months per international relocation and additional time off for being the sole carer for my children, which adds up to shifting my PhD award date by several years.

So, what would it take for American higher education institutions to become less discriminatory towards mothers, and specifically single mothers? The ongoing pandemic could be the opportunity to start acknowledging the long-standing gender gap in promotion and employment and implement crucial measures: paid maternity leave for all (regardless of their permanent or adjunct work status) and paid carer's leave for those academic mothers who temporarily find themselves without childcare solution and have children under a certain age. Inspired by the Australian model, another step could be the acknowledgment of motherhood as a strength rather than some shameful fact to be concealed at all costs. By that, I mean that academics who are mothers—and, even more, single mothers—should be able to make the case in their promotion and job market research narratives as well as their CVs that their caring duties are in fact a testimony to their exceptional productivity, which is part of the standard grant and promotion application in Australia under the heading “research outputs relative to opportunities” and “statement of career breaks.” In the immediate crisis, another step that some universities could take would be to make asynchronous teaching possible whenever childcare duties are bound to make synchronous online teaching delivery challenging. Beyond institutional policies, what academia as a whole could do, once the pandemic is over, is to retain the possibility of delivering conference papers remotely, thus increasing single academic mothers' chances to participate in major international conferences and accept invited talks.

Thus, the pandemic has highlighted the preexisting gender gaps in academia, just like in other professional spheres, and has further marginalized single academic mothers in most U.S. institutions. As adjuncts are now being on the frontline of massive redundancies in the wake of the budget crisis brought about by the pandemic, if no immediate action is taken, it, unfortunately, does not seem that such extraordinary times will have enabled more supportive and family-friendly academic policies and practices. With no perspective in sight of a return to pre-COVID-19 normalcy in most of the U.S. and the world, the productivity gap between academic mothers and their male or childless counterparts is likely to widen steadily. Single academic mothers are likely to become increasingly at risk of being denied tenure and other promotions when

they do hold a permanent position. It, thus, appears urgent for many American higher education institutions, and for academia as a whole, to reframe their policies to consider minority groups that have been severely affected by the pandemic, especially since institutions of higher learning usually promote ideals of inclusiveness and equality.

## Endnotes

1. I am here paraphrasing the title of Mary Ann Mason's famous 2013 essay, "The Baby Penalty."
2. I am here reporting information from Facebook posts by seven French single mothers—three of them members of the FB group "Game of Twins: Parents Solo de Twins" and four of them members of the FB group "Mamans 100% Solo de Jumeaux."
3. See <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2020/health/coronavirus-schools-reopening/> for a map of school openings and closures in the US state by state.
4. See The University of Sydney's Enterprise Agreement 2018-2021, <https://intranet.sydney.edu.au/employment/enterprise-agreement.html>, as well as <https://www.sydney.edu.au/policies/showdoc.aspx?recnum=PDOC2016/423&RendNum=0>. Article 11 in the University of Sydney's Paid Leave Policy:
  - "Personal leave (1) Sick and carer's leave form part of a staff member's personal leave entitlements and allow a staff member to take leave:
    - when they are not fit for work due to personal illness or injury;
    - or (b) to provide care or support to a member of their immediate family or household due to a personal illness or injury or an unexpected emergency."
  - Additionally, since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the following amendment has been made to include adjuncts:
    - "Recognising the loyalty and commitment of our casual staff, measures have been introduced today to support them if they are required to self-isolate, become ill with Covid-19, or have to care for someone who is required to self-isolate or becomes ill with Covid-19.
    - The measure includes access to special paid leave for self-isolation or illness due to COVID-19, or in the event the campus is closed, and they are unable to work from home. The special paid leave will cover any rostered hours that they have to miss in a 10 working day period." (13 March 2020, <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2020/03/13/university-of-sydney-update-regarding-covid-19.html#:~:text=The%20measure%20includes%20access%20to,a%2010%20working%20day%20period>).

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## Identity and Connection as Working Mothers during the Pandemic: An Autoethnographic Account

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has affected working professionals around the world, causing many to alter their identities to cope with their current realities. This article explores the effect the pandemic has had on the identity of two mothers, who are also working professionals/educators. Using a heartfelt autoethnography approach, the authors implement the listening guide method of analysis to authentically understand how these mothers experience identity and connection while working and parenting during this worldwide crisis. The listening guide approach involves the creation of “I-poems,” which are included and explored in the current article. The listening revealed four main themes: (1) mental load and exhaustion; (2) conflicting identities; (3) shame cycle; and (4) connection and reflection. The goal of this manuscript is to highlight the experiences of working mothers through an authentic and relational approach.*

### Introduction

Since women entered the workforce, they have struggled with balancing work and home life. In particular, working mothers have been pressured to separate their identity as mothers from their identity as professionals (Turner and Norwood 396). However, working mothers are frequently faced with situations that force them to combine these two roles, such as when attempting to parent and work in the same physical space (Turner and Norwood 396). These identities are even more intertwined during the COVID-19 pandemic, as mothers who are also working from home have been juggling how to both parent and work in the same space, at the same time. As such, the coronavirus pandemic has set the clocks backwards in terms of gender equality, especially for working mothers, whose employment during the pandemic is more at risk

than that of men (Alon et al.). It is nearly impossible for working mothers to keep their professional lives separate from their personal lives while working remotely because during the pandemic women are still expected to take on the majority of the housework and childrearing responsibilities (Power 67). Furthermore, motherhood has become particularly challenging for women working in academia because as Brooke Burk argues the patriarchal systems in higher education do not account for the needs of women and their families (Burk et al. 1).

In this study, we focused on the stories and experiences of ourselves, two working mothers—one faculty member (Brittany) and one staff member (Sheva)—at a large Midwestern research institution. We happen to be colleagues and friends, which led to an authentic conversation. Christopher Clark argues that authentic conversations require care, trust, and safety, as participants must be willing to share their vulnerabilities, experiences, and opinions. Clark further suggests that these conversations cannot be forced and are often developed over time. Through this study, we engaged in an authentic conversation; we were open and were willing to be vulnerable by sharing our honest feelings and experiences. This qualitative study is implemented through a feminist lens using dialogue, which ensures our stories are told in our own words. This study is a follow-up to our recent “Academic Motherhood During COVID-19” (Guy and Arthur) article, in which we employ a reflective dialogue to highlight our struggles as working mothers during the pandemic.

The purpose of the present study is to expand on our previous study and allow for the struggles of working mothers to be highlighted as they relate specifically to identity and connection during the pandemic. Gaining insights into the struggles of mothers attempting to work from home during COVID-19 may allow for more authentic conversations to be had around how we can continue to best support our colleagues, peers, friends, and families. This study uses a feminist lens to implement the listening guide method to analyze qualitative, narrative data, and it is theoretically framed by the methodology of heartfelt autoethnography.

## Method

As this article uses autoethnography as a feminist method, we, the researchers, are also the participants; thus, we implement a modified autoethnographical method to collect data through dialogue (Burnard). Autoethnography traditionally uses personal narratives to highlight the experiences of researchers as subjects (Burnard). Feminist autoethnography highlights inclusivity and social justice in an autoethnographic approach to ensure the voices of marginalized individuals are heard (Allen and Piercy); heartfelt autoethnography involves valuing dialogue as a way of meaning making and coping

(Ellis). Autoethnography traditionally employs a personal narrative, whereas heartfelt autoethnography involves dialogue. We chose the listening guide as a data analysis tool to complement our feminist, heartfelt autoethnographical approach, as both methodologies are rooted in feminist thought and embrace the use of narratives as qualitative data.

The listening guide—a method of psychological analysis focusing on voice, resonance, and relationships (Gilligan et al.)—was used to analyze the participants’ written reflections and verbal discussion. This method works as “a pathway into [a] relationship rather than a fixed framework for interpretation” (Brown and Gilligan 22). Carol Brown and Jessica Gilligan outline the listening guide as a method of analysis that allows the researcher to truly listen for voice and relationships within an individual’s story (23). This method has universal utilization, since every person has a way of communicating “that renders the silence and invisible inner work audible or visible to another” (Gilligan et al. 157). Highlighting the uniqueness of this method, Brown and Gilligan mention that the listening guide is “responsive to the harmonics of psycho life, the nonlinear, recursive, nontransparent play, interplay, and orchestration of feelings and thoughts, the polyphonic nature of any utterance, and the symbolic nature not only of what is said but also of what is *not* said” (23). From our standpoint, the listening guide provides a feminist relational approach to understanding and analyzing the experiences of participants. The listening guide has often been used to explore and discuss difficult and taboo topics, such as experiences of rape and sexual objectification (Brown; Brown and Gilligan; Guy; Koelsch; Johnstone; Chmielewski). More specifically, women often speak in “indirect discourse, in voices deeply encoded, deliberately or unwittingly opaque” (Brown and Gilligan 24). Therefore, the listening guide was an ideal tool to help us authentically explore the unspoken struggles working women and mothers face.

### **Data Collection**

Using a modified, heartfelt autoethnography approach, we, two women and mothers, record and transcribe an authentic conversation (Clark), in which we discuss as friends and colleagues answers to the question “What is alive for you right now?” This question sparks dialogue around how we are feeling, what we are struggling with, and how the pandemic has changed us. Our conversation was conducted and recorded via WebEx, a video conferencing application supported by our university. Each of us participated in the conversation from our homes, Sheva in her daughter’s nursery and Brittany in a spare bedroom. We engaged in dialogue around the prompt for one-hour. We then transcribed the conversation, which became our raw data.

Brittany is a thirty-one-year-old mother of one, James, who is ten months

old. She identifies as a white, able bodied, and cisgender woman. She is married, and her partner works in an essential industry outside the home. She is an associate professor at a large research institution and is a doctoral candidate in a PhD program. She attempts to get her teaching, scholarship, and service responsibilities accomplished while working from home with her young son.

Sheva is twenty-eight-year-old mother of three: C, a seven-year-old second grader, D, a six-year-old first grader, and Finley, a seven-month-old toddler. She identifies as a white, able bodied, and cisgender woman. She is married and her partner stays at home. She is the manager of a faculty development centre at a larger research institution and teaches psychology at a large private institution. Sheva is attempting to accomplish her traditional staff role in a regular nine-to-five working day while working from home and homeschooling two young children.

### **Data Analysis**

The listening guide was utilized for data analysis, as it provides a voice-centred approach that requires that the researcher deeply listen. Throughout the analysis the researcher listens for the “different voices [of participants] and follows their movement” throughout the interview (Brown and Gilligan 25). For our research, this deep listening was essential, as we wanted to remain authentic to uncovering different relationships and voices through our analysis while also thoughtfully articulating differences and attending to the different voices embedded in an individual’s experiences, which the listening guide allowed us to do. The listening guide consists of at least three listenings, with additional listenings conducted as needed. We individually conducted four listenings and compared and consolidated our analyses, which led to a degree of reliability in our findings by providing interrater reliability.

The first listening listens for two items: the plot and the researchers’ response to the interview (Gilligan et al. 160). This listening requires that the researcher pay particular attention to the plot and “landscape of the interview,” thinking through “who is there, who or what is missing, are there repeated words, salient themes, striking metaphors or symbols, emotional hot-spots, gaps, or ruptures” (Gilligan 71). Additionally, the first listening asks the researcher to reflect on where they see themselves in relation to the data and to explore their own feelings and thoughts as they listen (Gilligan 71). This listening ensures that the researcher reflects on any potential countertransference to avoid (as much as possible) projecting feelings onto others in the writing process.

The second listening involves listening for and identifying “I” statements to highlight how the first-person voice discusses being and acting in the world (Gilligan 71). The second listening also involves reviewing the transcript and picking out every “I” statement and listing them in order of appearance within

the transcript. These statements can be used to tell the participants' stories in the form of I-poems, as when read, they fall into a "poetic cadence" while also allowing the reader to listen for dissociation (Gilligan 71).

In the third listening, the reader listens for contrapuntal voices, which draws us back to the research question. Within this listening, we are looking for the complexity of the interviewees thinking, listening for the "tensions, the harmonies and dissonances between different voices" (Gilligan 72). The researcher may need to complete additional listenings past the third listening to attend to the various voices that may surface as they relate to their research question. The contrapuntal listenings allow us to develop an understanding of the different layers that comprise a person's expressed experience (Gilligan et al. 165). Listenings beyond the first three are not necessary but are encouraged in order for the listener to understand the overarching themes of the narrative and to find answers to the research questions. Although a fourth listening is not always necessary, for our research, it was important in order to listen more closely for the complexities of experiences.

Our fourth listening involved reading through the dialogue and identifying the dominant ideologies throughout. The previous three listenings unveiled several overarching themes, which led to implementing a fourth listening that listened specifically for the aforementioned patterns that were identified. The fourth listening was conducted to elicit a more thorough understanding of the dominant findings.

## Findings

### *First Listening: Listening for the Plot*

Throughout the discussion, we expressed that our identities of being a mother and an educator are important to us. Before the pandemic, these identities could be separated, as we were able to effectively compartmentalize them. However, due to COVID-19, these identities must coexist while working from home, where we are both mother and professional simultaneously. The difficulty of this was noted, not only from a logistical standpoint but also from an emotional one. We discuss feelings of exhaustion, fatigue, guilt, and shame throughout the conversation.

The topic of self and identity was discussed. We both mentioned that we felt as if we had lost a part of ourselves as we moved to working from home. Although internally we were emotionally struggling with this transition, we recognized that we strive to ensure that our colleagues see us as put together and confident. We acknowledged that our emotions about the situation are constantly evolving and changing from moment to moment and recognized that some days we felt exhausted, whereas other days, we felt thankful and grateful. This constant shift in emotion was also something we identified as

exhausting; this instability and constant adjusting left us feeling helpless.

Throughout the conversation, we discussed feeling emotionally tired from carrying such a large mental load. This emotional exhaustion came from working from home and being mothers. This mental load was amplified by frustration of not knowing what the future would hold as a result of the pandemic. This exhaustion had significant implications for the way we felt about our identities and our productivity, which led to other emotions, such as shame and guilt.

We both identified with the idea of perfectionism. We noted how important being productive was to our professional identities, even though we recognized that the idea of perfectionism was detrimental to us at the moment. The idea of being efficient was also a common thread throughout the conversation; efficiency was now a constant in our current realities, as we tried to satisfy the expectations of being a mother and a professional simultaneously, which required that we were intentional and efficient with our time. This need for efficiency also left us feeling exhausted and unable to be present in the current moment.

Shame and guilt were common emotions that we mentioned experiencing. We felt guilty because we were not as productive as we once were, when we were able to physically go into the office and when being a professional and mother were separate identities and realities. Feelings of guilt arose when we could not be emotionally present in moments with our children because of the heavy mental load we were carrying. Feelings of guilt led to feelings of shame, as we felt that experiencing guilt was not an acceptable emotion to be feeling.

### ***Second Listening: Listening for the “I”***

In these statements, Sheva describes what it is like being at home, trying to work remotely, while also mothering three children. She also discusses dealing with the uncertainty of the future due to the pandemic:

*I'm giving you everything right now*

*I'm home all the time*

*I don't know*

*I find myself*

*I have to acknowledge*

*I am not in control*

*I am a control freak*

*I'm really annoyed*

*I can't fix this*

*and*

*I'm trying*

*I feel like it's helplessness*

In Brittany's statements, she discusses how working remotely with an infant has affected her identity as well as her emotions:

*I can't even sit down*  
*I could be editing*  
*I need to do this*  
*I can't relax*  
*I can't relax*  
*I need to get this*  
*I wish that*  
*I could be*  
*I could just be more present*  
*I'm just on edge all the time*  
*I'm on it*  
*Guilt for what I'm feeling*  
*I'm not doing enough*  
*I feel like I'm losing myself*  
*I feel like I'm losing it*  
*I feel*  
*I've already*  
*I've already lost it*

In these statements, Brittany and Sheva go back and forth and talk about being mothers and their experiences of raising infants:

*I don't know*  
*I think it's not super fun*  
*I'm trying to figure out*  
*I thought people said that this was enjoyable*  
*I didn't like this*  
*I could distinguish his cries*  
*I started to enjoy this*  
*I'm a control freak*  
*I let my anxiety rule*  
*I didn't enjoy the earlier stuff*  
*I felt so disconnected*

*I felt like*  
*I was kind of in a different position*  
*I have to pay more attention*

*I mean I'm tired*  
*I mean you know you're exhausted*  
*I will never do this again*  
*I love her*  
*I will never do this again*  
*I will never forget*  
*I was traumatized*  
*I think that that's normal*

### ***Third Listening: Listening for Relationships***

Many of the salient relationships described primarily transpired in our homes due to the constraints of social distancing and quarantine imposed by the pandemic. These relationships created some tensions stemming from the frustrations that arose while working from home. Both of us described the difficulty our spouses had with understanding our mental load as mothers, which led to some level of strain in our marital relationships. Yet we also talked wanting to make as much time for our partners as possible, which was challenging due to our children being constantly in the house with us as well as feeling exhausted at the end of a long day of working and childrearing.

Additionally, both of us became mothers within the last year, so we navigated our relationships with our children under particularly unusual circumstances. We grappled between feeling grateful for spending time with our children and feeling overwhelmed and frustrated while attempting to work our fulltime jobs while our children were at home. However, we both expressed feeling lucky to be able to watch our children grow up and be with them all day, every day, but this also led to mental exhaustion, which caused us to sometimes lose patience with our children, leading to feelings of guilt and shame.

We also discussed a need for connection as well as the struggle to maintain relationships outside of the household during this troubling time. As we engaged in remote dialogue, we both wished to be physically next to each other and to have these intimate, vulnerable conversations in person. Although the conversation would have primarily been the same, there was a level of added discomfort and disconnection when we spoke with physical barriers.

### ***Fourth Listening: Listening for Themes***

Several key themes and subthemes emerged during the fourth listening, which combined the main ideologies and ideas that arose during each of the three previous listenings. The four main themes that appeared throughout the listenings were mental load and exhaustion, conflicting identities, shame cycle, and connection and reflection.

*Mental Load and Exhaustion*

One of the most prominent themes was general exhaustion, which is in part caused by the mental load that working mothers face. We described an overwhelming need to make every moment count, which manifested from our perfectionism and need to be efficient and productive while juggling several responsibilities both at home and at work. Brittany described herself calculating her every move and choice in regard to efficiency. Sheva agreed and described the mental load of mothers in general; she constantly felt that every single second had to be productive, which led to overall exhaustion, both physically and mentally. We feel tired in the sense of needing sleep, but are also tired of constantly thinking about all that needs to be done, while at the same time worrying about staying safe during the pandemic.

*Conflicting Identity*

We described a conflicting identity that arises from working and parenting in the same physical environment and at concurrent times. Sheva said, “I feel like I’m losing myself a little,” and Brittany agreed: “I feel like I’ve already lost it.” Brittany asked, “Will I ever be able to be these two people independently ever again?” whereas Sheva felt the same fear, wondering “How do I prioritize [my identities]?” Regarding our conflicting identities, we felt a disconnect between needing to appear put together and professional at work and not being able to hide the chaos going on in our homes. We both worried that the way we appear on video calls to our supervisors and colleagues could affect our career trajectory. Sheva worried that parenting her children while working would lead her supervisors to wonder “Why would we trust her with more responsibilities if she’s got all of this going on?” Brittany said that “this constantly back and forth” between her two identities also contributed to her exhaustion.

*Shame Cycle*

Throughout the dialogue, we described a salient shame cycle, which is present in our everyday lives while working and parenting during the pandemic (see Fig. 1). The cycle typically begins with guilt, which leads to shame, then the need to feel grateful, and then back to guilt.

For example, we both described our feelings of guilt stemming from being unable to commit 100 per cent to both our roles of mothers and educators during the pandemic. This guilt led to feelings of shame that we could not succeed in either roles; therefore, a feeling of failing became prevalent. These feelings of guilt and shame then led to feelings that we should feel grateful that we were able to spend so much time with our children and that we should be thankful to be mothers. This led right back to guilt, in that as mothers we felt guilty when we were not expressing gratitude for the time we could spend with our children.

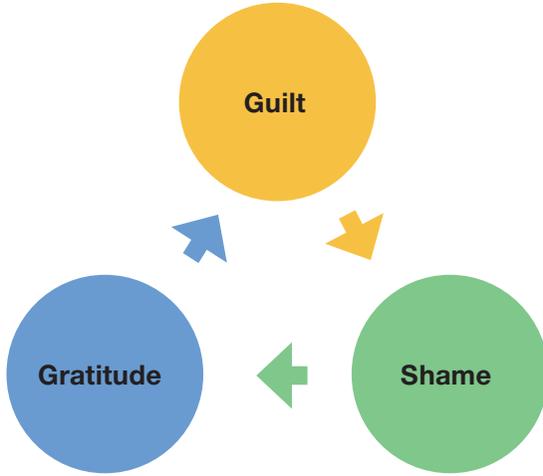


Fig. 1. Shame Cycle

Another example of the shame cycle involved fear of the pandemic, and it started with gratitude. We felt grateful that we could stay safe and keep their children safe at home. However, Sheva said she felt guilty that she felt grateful to be at home and safe, which led to feelings of shame regarding privilege.

*Connection and Reflection*

During quarantine and social distancing, we found ourselves craving connection and normalcy in our relationships. We both have made effort to maintain relationships and create connection and social interactions both virtually and socially distanced. Yet it still felt like even though we were having the same conversations that we would normally have and were the same people, there was still that disconnect when forced to communicate six feet apart. Moreover, we felt that a certain energy was missing with these types of interactions.

Although we missed social connection, we also became more reflective and intentional about the relationships we maintained, as we set boundaries for our own mental health. Brittany asked, “What do I need ... in order to do my job, in order to be a good mom,” and, for her, setting clear boundaries in relationships was crucial. Sheva did a mental inventory of the things that were healthy and helpful for her and the things that were not; she cut from her life those people and behaviors that were harmful emotionally. This was itself an act of self-care, and we discussed other self-care practices we used, such as talking walks, wearing comfortable clothes, and making time to have alone time with our spouses.

## Discussion

Professionals around the world are struggling with the reality of attempting to work from home. Mothers are experiencing a heavier burden, as they juggle the competing roles of being a mother and professional. Through this heartfelt autoethnography, we authentically and relationally analyzed the experiences of ourselves as two working mothers. From the analysis, we see how we attempted to juggle our multiple identities, more specifically our identities associated with being a mother and a professional. We were forced to develop and utilize a variety of techniques to create a structure for ourselves and our families, as the pandemic created much chaos and uncertainty. Overall, we see mother professionals adapting and assimilating to a tough situation.

The themes of mental load and exhaustion, conflicting identities, shame cycle, and connection and reflection were uncovered and analyzed through the listening guide. Overall, we experienced cognitive dissonance between what we were feeling (anger and frustration) and what we thought we should be feeling (thankfulness and gratefulness). Oftentimes, we felt feelings of thankfulness and gratefulness were expected from us, due to thankfulness and gratefulness being more associated with a feminine identity. This cognitive dissonance led to an overarching feeling of guilt, which then led to a heavy feeling of shame. In our analysis, we referred to this move from guilt to shame as the shame cycle. Throughout the analysis, we saw a cyclical nature to the feelings that we experienced.

A limitation of this study is its small sample size; future studies would benefit from exploring the experiences of a larger and more diverse group of women. Although we, as the only two participants, acknowledge our privileges, we are both white, cisgender, able bodied, employed and middle class. Therefore, our experiences cannot represent all working mothers. Future research must explore more diverse experiences to gain a better understanding of mothers working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, we both work in the context of higher education. Although this study was specifically designed to explore the experiences of working mothers in academia, research on the overall experience of working mothers in this pandemic is crucial to better understand the barriers that this population faces.

We hope that this article will support the continuing of conversations around the concept of academic motherhood and the juggling of competing identities. Women in the academy continue to face challenges and barriers, as the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified these struggles. Attempting to work from home with children requires that mothers balance their dual identities of being a mother and professional. By using authentic, feminist approaches to research and analysis, we can better understand the experiences of working

mothers, ensuring that these experiences are not portrayed as monolithic but as complex and diverse.

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## Frontline Workers from Home: A Feminist Duoethnographic Inquiry of Mothering, Teaching, and Academia during the Initial Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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*In this article, we use a feminist lens to discuss and critique the unique challenges associated with our multidimensional identities as Ontario elementary schoolteachers, mothers, and academics. Employing a duoethnographic method, we recount our personal lived experiences of mothering, teaching, and academic related tasks during initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. We juxtapose our experiences at home, in our combined identities and roles, with the various levels of expectations set upon us. From the teaching front, these expectations include those from the government, school boards, and educational administration. On the academic front, there are the hidden expectations of writing and publishing, and being productive during mandated down time. At home, there are increases in domestic labour, caring for children and, for one of the authors, homeschooling. Taking into account the “Learn at Home” program, mandated synchronous learning, Ontario’s provincial approach to reopening schools for the 2020–2021 school year, and the literature on motherhood and academia, this article explores the nuanced experiences, barriers, and challenges that we encountered at the beginning and throes of the pandemic and into the unknown. The dialogic analysis of our experiences is rooted in feminist understandings of motherhood, teaching, and academia; it highlights the gendered issues of domestic and precarious labour, paid labour, caregiving, and mandatory social isolation.*

### Introduction

On March 12, 2020, the Ontario government closed all public schools in the province for the following three weeks, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This closure was followed by a swift conversion to online remote learning models, in which education for over two million Ontario elementary and

secondary students was provided by teachers, most of whom are women (Statistics Canada). Shortly thereafter, childcare centres also closed, leaving many families with a loss of childcare. In this article, we take readers through our dialogic stories from the beginning and the midst of the pandemic as we ventured into the unknown elements of our lives as mothers, teachers, and academics. We use a feminist duoethnographic method of inquiry to capture and understand our experiences.

As the pandemic continues to impact our lives at unprecedented rates and in unpredictable fashions, it is important to situate this article in time and place. We embarked on our inquiry and wrote this article in July 2020. Our geographic location is Southwestern Ontario, important to note because our work and lives are deeply impacted by not only national but also provincial politics and decision-making bodies. Although the pandemic continues to rapidly evolve, our temporal scope ranges from mid-March to late July. Mid-March is the beginning of our experiences as captured in this article because that is when the government mandated schools and childcare centres to close and universities moved to remote-learning models in response to COVID-19. Late July is the concluding timeframe of our narratives in this article; however, we acknowledge that this is by no means the conclusion of our ongoing experiences with the pandemic.

### **Positionality/Reflexivity**

As feminist scholars, we prioritize the act of situating oneself within our inquiries as a crucial part of epistemic responsibility. Who we are affects not only how we experience the world but also what we can know. In the following excerpts, we position ourselves in relation to our inquiry.

#### *Salsabel*

I see myself first and foremost as a mother, teacher, and scholar because these are identities that I have created for myself and that I have chosen to struggle within. However, coming to an understanding of my position in the social world necessitates that I disclose that the following aspects of my identity as well: I am a woman, a first-generation immigrant, a visible Muslim, and an Iraqi Canadian who comes from a low socioeconomic background but who is now in some ways a part of the middle class. I am also a wife, and I am responsible for the great majority of domestic and childcare labour in my home. Furthermore, my husband and I do not have any extended family in Canada, and, as a result, we have very limited support.

As a doctoral student and sessional instructor, I am part of a privileged space of knowledge creators. Although academia is an elite place, there are many ways

in which it disadvantages people of colour, such as myself; thus, I find myself simultaneously part of its elite standing and on the margins of it. I recognize that being an employed educator who is represented by a union carries some privilege, even though elementary teaching is in many ways not a privileged space for workers. However, as a nonwhite teacher in an overwhelmingly white schoolboard, I often contemplate the deep marginalization I've experienced in my role. As a long-term occasional (LTO) teacher, I have the privilege of having long-term employment, although I am still classified as "occasional." This means that each year is uncertain, and my position is not fully secure until I receive a permanent contract, which puts me in a precarious position as a worker. As a doctoral student, I am involved in various precarious roles that involve research, service, and sessional teaching. The challenges of precarious labour are heightened for myself as a mother and woman of colour; however, my physical ability places me in a position of privilege in various layers of my experiences.

### *Kimberly*

Over the past six years, I have simultaneously juggled the roles of mother, graduate student, and elementary school educator. Striving to remain conscious of the certain levels of privilege I possess, I actively reflect and transparently share these components of my identity with the readers of this work. Acknowledging the significance of positionality within the research process, I would be remiss not to disclose the historically privileged aspects of my identity that shape my positionality as a feminist scholar and mother. I recognize and acknowledge the significance of situating myself in relation to my positionality as a white, middle-class, cisgender, and able-bodied woman who occupies spaces in historically privileged contexts. Therefore, although my status as a woman and mother in academia presents certain structural and institutional challenges based on gender, I acknowledge that I have benefited from systems of privilege based on race, class, ableism, and sexuality in multiple contexts. In our household, my husband completes the majority of the domestic labour. Childcare duties are shared somewhat equally, except for my taking on more when his work schedule (i.e., having to work mandatory overtime) challenges this division. I am the manager of all things "unseen," such as clothing, school-related tasks, and decision making. My husband and I have immediate family members and close friends who are available and willing to help with childcare when the need presents itself. With this privilege, I position myself as an ally to marginalized and traditionally disenfranchised individuals and groups, both within the research process and the everyday contexts disclosed above.

## **Mothering, Teaching, and Academia within the Context of COVID-19**

This discussion explores the impacts of the current global pandemic on women and mothers as well as on teacher mothers and academics, within the context of COVID-19. For purposes of this research, the term “mothers” will hereinafter refer to Andrea O’Reilly’s definition and include “any individual who engages in motherwork” (YFile). We define “academics” as those participating in academia through full or part-time studies and/or academic employment as sessional, adjunct, or professor. Teacher mothers include those who are mothers and are practicing certified teachers in public elementary or secondary schools.

Prior to the pandemic, it was well established, both anecdotally and statistically, that women and mothers managed many of the domestic- and caregiving-related responsibilities (Statistics Canada). Although most women participate in the labour force in Canada, they continue to comprise the majority of those who complete informal and unpaid caregiving duties for children, elders, and people who are ill or with disabilities (Statistics Canada). In each of these contexts, women disproportionately shoulder the lion’s share of the childcare and domestic tasks. For example, women spend an average of 50.1 hours per week on childcare, more than double the average time (24.4 hours) spent by men (Statistics Canada). Certainly, in the context of the global pandemic, these rates have dramatically increased, as it is mothers who are mostly home with children all day long.

Beginning in mid-March, mothers began to experience intensified domestic and caregiving responsibilities in the home front. After the Government of Ontario declared an emergency under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act in response to COVID-19, schools and childcare centres were both mandated to be closed, effective immediately. This action had immediate implications for families, which was especially true for lone-parent and mother-led families, who in 2014, headed approximately 80 per cent of lone-parent families in Canada (Statistics Canada). Lone-parent mothers were especially affected by food insecurities due to extensive job loss and reduced hours of work (Statistics Canada), but this was a public health issue that was common among low-income mother-led households well before the pandemic (McIntyre et al.). Food insecurity is defined as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Government of Canada). The financial effects of COVID-19 have increased for those who reported having experienced food insecurity during the pandemic (Statistics Canada). For example, according to a food insecurity report conducted by Statistics Canada, nearly 15 per cent of Canadians indicated that in May 2020, they lived in a household that had experienced food insecurity within

the past 30 days. Of this 15 per cent, the rate of food insecurity was higher for households with children (19.2 per cent) (Statistics Canada).

Although the shift to working from home may have created more opportunities to meet professional responsibilities with greater ease, academic mothers soon began to voice their concerns about the limitations this new lifestyle imposed on their productivity. Certainly, fathers face increased demands during the pandemic as well; however, as the literature demonstrates, it is primarily mothers who often manage far greater domestic and caregiving loads, regardless of their academic or professional obligations. Although academic mothers belong to a space that is inherently privileged, the current pandemic has further highlighted the unique gender-based discrimination within academia, which has been dubbed the “motherhood penalty” or “baby penalty” (Correll et al.; Mason et al.). Demonstrating some of these barriers academic mothers face, recent studies have suggested that academic women have submitted fewer single-authored studies during the first few months of the pandemic (Flaherty). Reflecting the intersections of identities in certain faculties (e.g., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), the gender gap in submissions has widened to an even greater degree for women in science, where gender, class, and racial inequities are hardly obscure (Markova et al.). The mandated school and childcare closures have further contributed to many mothers’ abilities to remain and reenter the workforce in other fields as well.

The microenvironment of the pandemic has rendered productivity for mothers as nearly impossible. Government mandated school and childcare closures have either partially or completely removed many mothers out of the workforce, which is projected to continue to affect their reentry as the pandemic continues. This reality was demonstrated by the June 2020 Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey, which revealed that as of May 2020, the employment rate among men had recovered to 93.2 per cent of its February level, compared to 89.2 per cent among women (Statistics Canada). This discussion draws attention to the many ways COVID-19 has affected various women and mothers. It also highlights how the gendered expectancy of mothers to adhere to their designated feminine-coded duties of care has impacted their ability to remain productive and active in the workforce. Acknowledging the increase in hardships felt by lone-parent mothers and racialized mothers, the pandemic has brought to the surface many inequities pertaining to motherhood. In the next section, we outline our use of a duoethnographic method that is informed by feminist methodology.

## Duoethnographic Method

Duoethnography is a relatively new method of inquiry that involves two researchers who employ narrative as a communicative strategy (Norris; Sawyer and Norris; Krammer and Mangiardi). Engaging in the duoethnographic method involves being in conversation with each other and with the broader social, cultural, and political structures that inform our experiences. We understand duoethnography as a dialogic method, which allows us to draw on our lived experiences to investigate motherhood, teaching, and academia in the context of a global pandemic. In keeping with the tenets of feminist methodology, this article situates experience as intersectional, mediated to some degree by discursive realities, and located within broader sociopolitical structures. By highlighting our own voices as women and mothers, we practice the feminist goal of centring the voices of women, and we do so in a reflexive manner. Our experiences are deeply tied to our respective positionalities, and our goal is to shed light on issues related to our inquiry, not to generalize our experiences to all teacher mothers or to all academic mothers. Although this article does illuminate some of the literature and voices of various mothering populations, it is beyond its aims to provide generalized insight into the positionalities of other mothering populations during the initial stages of the pandemic.

Donna Krammer and Rosemarie Mangiardi explain that duoethnography involves revealing, reconstructing, and reinterpreting our experiences, examining the meanings we associate with them, and then “allowing those meanings to be transformed into the dialogical coupling and the juxtaposition of the coupling” (44). Joe Norris similarly articulates the process of duoethnography in the following quote: “Each author of a duoethnographic piece is both the researcher and researched. The team employs storytelling to simultaneously generate, interpret, and articulate data.... Their stories weave back and forth in juxtaposition to one another, creating a third space between the two into which readers may insert their own stories” (234). After the conclusion of the school year, we met once a week for a month to engage in dialogue based on the respective journaled narratives that we had prepared. We took detailed notes on our dialogues, and each week these notes informed our narratives for the following one.

At the heart of this process is the relationship between us as authors and the ongoing conversation that takes place throughout the research process. The dialogic and generative process allowed us to arrive at “unanticipated points of intersection” (Krammer and Mangiardi 44), which paved the way for a deeper exploration into our shared experiences of mothering, teaching, and academia during a global pandemic and how these findings shed light on broader issues of gender, domestic and precarious labour, and systemic injustice.

Rick Breault states that duoethnographers should disclose the nature of their relationship to each other at the outset. As we share the same doctoral advisor, ours began when he introduced us to each other and exclaimed that we were alike in our interests, drives, and journeys. When we met, we found that our conversations often revolved on motherhood and all the challenging, beautiful, and sometimes outrageous ways it had impacted our experiences as academics and teachers. Our relationship has flourished in collaboration and friendship through embarking on the present inquiry.

It is within the tenets of duoethnographic inquiry that the dialogic process of analysis is ultimately communicated in a manner that highlights each voice; as such, it is often written in a way that is akin to a play script (Norris and Sawyer; Breault et al.). One aspect of duoethnography that stood out to us is its emphasis on transparency (Breault et al.), which compliments feminist methodology's value of reflexivity—the active and ongoing reflection of how our social and epistemological locations impact the knowledge we produce (Mauthner and Doucet).

### **In the Beginning**

On March 12, 2020, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health issued a ministerial order to close all publicly funded schools in the province until April 6, 2020. Unbeknownst to many educators and parents, this date would be further extended, and schools would remain closed until the end of the school year. On March 17, the Government of Ontario took swift decisive action by declaring an emergency under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act in response to COVID-19. This order immediately closed licensed childcare facilities and private schools. This day in mid-March marked what would be the start of widespread uncertainty and anxieties, as parents, workers, educators, healthcare officials, and many others would find themselves abruptly adapting to a new reality. However, unlike in the past, this new reality would occur in a context that included government-mandated social isolation and social distancing and, therefore, the withdrawal of multiple sources of paid and unpaid support. For teachers and postsecondary instructors, this new reality meant that they had to rush to plan and implement online instruction.

In the academic realm and specifically regarding writing and publishing projects, the new mandated down time meant productivity levels increased for some and diminished for others. Mothers have had challenges in moving online and remaining productive, since the line between workplace and childcare was no longer in place, which, in turn, has increased domestic and caregiving work. Moving to our own dialogic narratives, we discuss how these early stages of the pandemic influenced and shaped our experiences as mothers, academics, and teachers.

*Salsabel*

I am a mother to a feisty one-and-a-half-year-old. My husband is a small business owner, who works twelve hours a day. The division of labour falls overwhelmingly on me, and I didn't dwell on that fact until childcare was usurped from me. When my son was nine months old, I ended my maternity leave because I wanted to get him accustomed to daycare, and I felt ready to reenter academia. I also felt that it would be easier for him to begin experiencing daycare as a baby, before he reached the phase of a clingy toddler. I was right. Little did I know that when he was fifteen months, the world would shut down at the hands of a global pandemic. The intricacies of my decision-making process over the past few years as a working mother and student, particularly in relation to childcare and managing my career, seemed to fall apart in a day.

*Kimberly*

I am a mother to our five-year-old daughter. As parents to an only child, we are her playmates when she is not with her cousins or peers. Although this is something we both enjoy, the need to engage her in play during working from home hours was a challenge during the pandemic. Because my husband worked throughout the day, these caregiving responsibilities fell largely on my shoulders. Prior to the pandemic, my ability to manage my simultaneous roles as mother, teacher, and academic was largely attributable to my support systems, which include immediate family members, close friends, and licensed childcare provider. The importance of these support systems became even more apparent when the government announced that schools would be closed for an undetermined period of time. With no available options for childcare, I began to think of ways in which this would surely affect my ability to maintain my sense of balance, which has always been predicated on and maintained through my dependence on these supports. Bringing work into the home meant that my roles would surely overlap. As a teacher, bringing work home is not a unique experience, but teaching from home certainly was.

*Salsabel*

I took a longer maternity leave from my role as a public schoolteacher. It just so happens that I returned from my maternity leave the same week that the school closures began. As an LTO teacher, I wasn't sure if that meant that I would have an LTO position or remain without any teaching work until the upcoming school year. Two weeks into shutdown, I was placed into an LTO in a grade eight class. My biggest fear at this point was not how to teach online, as I felt that I was digitally savvy and relentless in my efforts to engage students. My biggest fears were how to do so while mothering a toddler and

how to build virtual connections with students whom I had never met before. Back at the university, I was rushing to move to online instruction as a sessional instructor and to develop a schedule for my toddler. To wrap up my course, I worked on developing a simple and engaging plan, involving the least amount of pain for my students and me.

### *Kimberly*

My husband is a frontline emergency responder, which meant many extended work shifts in the beginning of the pandemic. This increase in work hours challenged the established egalitarian divisions of labour in our home. His risk of exposure to the virus while he was at work was a constant worry, which quickly became a reality when he was required to self-isolate after coming into close contact with an individual who had just tested positive for COVID-19. Not only did this mean our health was potentially in imminent risk, but it also meant that I entirely lost the domestic and caregiving support he provided prior to his self-isolation. The recurrent risk of exposure over the next few months brought with it many warranted anxieties and compounded my already challenging and recalibrating loads of caregiving, homeschooling, and career(s) during this time. My role as an academic provided me with the much-needed respite from my roles as mother and teacher.

### *Salsabel*

I similarly feel that my scholarly tasks felt like much-needed time to retreat into myself—to imagine and be creative. This is particularly true for my writing and research projects, the ones unrelated to my dissertation.

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Our dialogic narratives in the beginning weeks of the lockdown have a thematic thread of concern over the challenges of continuing to work without childcare and family support. They also tell stories of precarious employment, emotional labour, intensified domestic and caregiving responsibilities, late nights spent working on career duties, and worry of contagion. Our gendered experiences were heavily compounded by various levels of institutional and systemic factors, such as the work our spouses engaged in as frontline and essential service workers. The opportunity to retreat from our roles as mothers and teachers was afforded through our roles as academics and was seen as a way to cope with the mental and physical exhaustion of constant teaching, caregiving, and domestic responsibilities throughout the day. At the centre of all of these issues is the gendered experiences of womanhood and motherhood, experiences often not shared by men and fathers (DelBoca et al; Hochschild; Vosko; Millier).

## **In the Throes**

This period represents a time in which it became evident that this was our new reality for the foreseeable future. In response to the school mandated closures, mothers now found themselves adopting a new role—as teachers in their own home. Teacher mothers were now adapting to this new role as well while acclimating to the unconventional world of remote learning. Important to note here is the disproportionate number of women in teaching-related professions. In Canada, women represent 68 per cent of teachers (Statistics Canada), so the demands placed on teacher mothers were undoubtedly experienced by many. Based on the mandates provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE), teachers and parents were now delivering education according to the directives outlined in the “Learn at Home” initiative to facilitate the continuance of learning. The hours of recommended time engaged in learning ranged from a minimum of five hours of work, per student, per week for kindergarten to grade three to over ten hours of work per week, per student for grades nine through twelve.

In addition to abruptly adapting to remote learning, teacher mothers and academic instructors were now also navigating the dilemma of synchronous learning. The expectation of synchronous learning mandated by the MOE meant that teachers were expected to use live teaching for entire classes, smaller group settings, or one-on-one interactions (Government of Ontario). For teacher mothers, the dual expectation to facilitate synchronous learning with their own class while participating in it for their own child often posed scheduling conflicts. Academic mothers whose children were school age faced similar issues, in addition to those posed by their roles within postsecondary institutions. The transition to online learning for academics involved swiftly adapting course materials, changing research programs and writing schedules, and struggling to keep up with the rapidly changing expectations at the tail end of a semester. These struggles were often compounded for academic mothers, who often had heightened caregiving and domestic responsibilities.

### *Kimberly*

In the throes of the pandemic, I found myself fluctuating between feeling like I was managing the new demands well to feeling relentless guilt for myriad reasons, which were mostly caused by institutional demands and social circumstances rather than the act of mothering itself. Although my daughter had some understanding that when I was working at home I needed some uninterrupted time, there was rarely a time where she granted it. Naturally, increases of attention seeking behaviours quickly became evident when I attempted to work while she played independently or was engaged in her own

schoolwork. The guilt that ensued from my daughter potentially feeling that she was not my priority when I was working often overwhelmed my heart in a way that many mothers are all too familiar with. This was a new form of guilt, since I do not typically feel guilty for being a working mother outside of the home.

### *Salsabel*

My toddler was very emotional and had several meltdowns a day. The initial period of stay-at-home mandate and heightened fears over going outside, even for a walk, in the middle of crowded downtown where we live, affected his moods and behaviours. I began to notice that his intense emotions, in conjunction with all of my responsibilities, were affecting my mental health. After all, I didn't exactly choose to have so much to do while caring for a toddler. When the MOE recommended synchronous learning, the principal emailed everyone, saying we should consider doing some form of it. I set my office hours from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. every day, as that is when my son napped. I had thought that when a toddler naps, the mother should rest. But I worked. Being a precarious and racialized worker, both in teaching and academia, always meant that I had to work harder and longer to prove myself. In the mornings, I made phone calls to parents and students, just to talk, so they knew I was here and that I cared. I had my earphones in as I changed my son's diaper and prepared his breakfast as well as enough activities to tire him so that he would nap through my office hours.

### *Kimberly*

On the day of my dissertation defence, a colleague warned me that as I began this next phase of my academic career, I would go through stages. Unbeknownst to me at the time, these stages would manifest themselves during a global pandemic. Although the exact stages this colleague was referring to were never clarified, I imagine they were referring to the personal progression most new graduates move through: imposter's syndrome, pressures to publish dissertation work, and competing within a jobless market. Coincidentally, and within no more than a few months of completing the PhD program, I indeed found myself going through stages that were both personal and government imposed. These government-imposed stages entailed those set forth by health officials and the personal stages paralleled with those of other recent graduates. As a recent graduate, I knew I could quickly fall behind if I did not maintain momentum. I began to write manuscripts from my dissertation almost immediately, but this process became sidetracked by a sense of urgency to write and publish about the current pandemic context.

*Salsabel*

In my role as a doctoral student, I attended meetings as my son ran around, into my lap and off. I offered him snacks, his soother, an episode of *Masha and the Bear*, all so I could get some reading and writing done. I felt persistent guilt. When he awoke from his nap, we would drive to a park that had more space for him to walk around. He loves being outside, especially in nature. Living in an apartment, we do not have the luxury of a backyard or a driveway. Although we do have the privilege of a car, I often thought of how much easier it would have all been if I had extra space. The new realities of increased expectations as a student, sessional instructor, elementary teacher, mother, and wife made me realize how deep my reliance on childcare was.

*Kimberly*

I regard my academic work as freely chosen work and see this role as one that provides respite from the others. As a new scholar, I was thrilled to learn and engage myself in these processes with myself and others, but I was also doing so while suppressing the all too familiar maternal guilt, imposter's syndrome, and effects of role strain that typically accompany these new demands. The timing of my PhD completion also overlapped with a global pandemic, an economic recession, and a jobless market, which have had implications for my opportunities to network with others in my field of research and opportunities for job mobility. However, the opportunity to practice in my field while completing a PhD has continued to provide me with financial security in an otherwise jobless market, and it still provides me great fulfillment.

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In the throes of the pandemic, we found ourselves adapting to new expectations in ways we didn't think were possible. Sustaining a career that demands interaction from home presented a set of challenges that most educators have not had to navigate prior to this pandemic. A telling emotion that we both experienced at a viscerally heightened level was guilt. The added pressures from media content about what other mothers were doing in terms of scheduling, homeschooling, and other activities often perpetuated the classed notion of intensive mothering ideologies (Hays). In turn, guilt resulted from feeling that we should give our children more attention, and, similarly, as educators and academics, we felt that we should be doing, caring, and giving more. Our narratives also tell of the gendered challenges of mothering in the midst of exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty. These experiences also speak to the ways in which elementary teaching—characterized by long hours, little flexibility, heightened emotional labour, and little regard for the complex gendered lives of teachers—is not a privileged space.

## Into the Unknown

We call this section “Into the Unknown” to capture the feeling that many mothers—and particular to this inquiry, teacher mothers and academic mothers—have as we move closer to the fall term. In early June 2020, the Ontario government said that there were three learning options of how schools would reopen in September: fully remote, partially remote and partially in school, or fully in school. The Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce, indicated that the goal for September was for students to return to the fully in-school model, although he stated that the ultimate decision would be made in consultation with public health officials (TDSB). In the following weeks, school boards began planning and communicating their plans for the three possible scenarios, all of which would present unique and unprecedented challenges.

Of interesting note is that on June 19, 2020, the MOE released its funding plan for the upcoming school year, and it included no specific funding for increased costs associated with reopening schools in a pandemic (People for Education). Another alarming message that MOE put forward in late June was that “teachers who stand at the front of the class, keeping two metres away from their students, don’t need personal protective equipment” (Miller). As teachers, we cannot recall a day when we stood in front of our class to deliver instruction. In elementary school, teachers are often very close to students, kneeling down to guide them, walking around to monitor them, and so on. Furthermore, for these age groups, learning is often heavily based in play, collaboration, and community, all of which are intertwined with bodily proximity to others in the classroom. Such challenges also hold true for academic mothers whose children are school age, as these mothers will be tasked with making complex decisions about their children’s education, health, and wellbeing. They share the feeling of diving into the unknown, which comes with various layers of challenges, including the psychological toll of uncertainty. In our narratives that follow, we tell our stories of moving into the unknown.

### *Kimberly*

As we await the announcement from the Minister of Education, I find myself growing more anxious about the repercussions of each scenario. The most difficult aspect of this waiting game comes from my role as a teacher mother. Like many other mothers, I am not necessarily able to exercise the choice between returning or not returning to work. The term “choice” is being used recklessly in discussions surrounding the return to school/work, and this is problematic, since those who can exercise choice do so within the flexible parameters of class privilege.

*Salsabel*

The choice of whether to send one's children to school in September is gendered and occurs within existing systems of inequity. For working mothers, this choice is an illusion. For teacher mothers, especially those who do not have the option of keeping their children at home, the choice is usurped if the MOE decides to reopen schools. I may consider taking an unpaid leave of absence to alleviate my maternal guilt, but that would exacerbate the financial stress that my family is already in as well as place me in a position in which I may be overlooked for a permanent position. Sending my toddler to daycare in the fall is difficult to fathom, given that he is too young to wear a face mask and maintain social distance from others. How can daycares mitigate the risk of virus transmission in a substantial way? How would the pandemic impact young children and staff at childcare centres? As a teacher, I have similar anxieties about keeping my students safe and staying true to my teaching philosophy, since I know the impossibility of contactless teaching, especially in my inner-city elementary school.

*Kimberly*

In approximately one week at the time of this writing, we will be provided with a solidified plan regarding the reopening of schools. As the days move closer to this anticipated announcement, I find myself becoming more anxious and searching for answers to the following questions. If we are back in the classroom on a fulltime regular basis, what will that entail for both students and teachers? How can virus transmission possibly be mitigated while also preserving the elements so critical to an effective and positive school environment for children? If we continue with remote learning, what effects will that have on my child, both socially and emotionally, as an observer to my working online and as a student herself? And finally, if we adopt a hybrid model, in addition to the aforementioned concerns, what are the options for childcare, if any? This inner dialogue represents some of the emotional labour inherent in the role of the teacher mother and the answers to these questions are asymmetrically gendered.

*Salsabel*

In the realm of academia, I know that the pandemic has stretched my timeline of doctoral studies. As a mother, and one who wants to have another child after graduation, my sense of time is heightened. I have a pressing drive to move through my milestones with minimal interruptions. I am afraid that the pandemic and the resulting issues for graduate students, such as longer periods of time spent waiting for feedback and emerging public health and ethical

constrictions to conducting social research, will mean a longer time in graduate school. I feel as though I have had to let go of my need for control and hyperorganization, but I fear that if I do so, all the sacrifices I've made to pursue doctoral education may be for nothing.

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As we move into the unknown, our narratives are shaped by feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, lack of control, and fear. In any reopening case, parents will be given the choice of whether or not to send kids to school. As our discussions unfolded, we found that this choice is more of a formality than an actual, free choice. It does not take into consideration social inequities, which in our case, revolve around our roles as mothers, and in our students' case, involve the challenges that come with reopening inner-city schools. Moreover, the use of the term "choice" to describe parents' agency in sending children to school disregards the multiple push and pull factors at play for mothers in the workforce. This choice is impeded by multiple social hierarchies, such as social class, and does not account for the increased amount of flexibility and privilege these factors afford some parents. The term "choice" is also shaped and influenced by women's traditional roles in society and functions to maintain hierarchical gender role expectations (Wolf-Wendel and Ward).

## Conclusion

Joe Norris and Richard Sawyer state that the third meaning maker in a duoethnography is the reader, who by engaging with our work, is an "implicit co-author" (22). As such, we practice the duoethnographic tenet of giving readers the freedom to make their own conclusions rather than imposing any onto them. In embarking on this feminist inquiry, it was always our goal to be in conversation with each other, with the research, and with the women who will read our work. Ultimately, we wanted to produce knowledge that is of benefit to women and mothers, especially those who are similarly situated. In this way, the dialogic aspect of duoethnography does not end upon the publication of this article; rather, it continues as long as readers continue to engage with it.

Our narratives presented in this article are the lived experiences of our journeys as mothers, Ontario elementary schoolteachers, and academics. Embedded in our narratives are common experiences of mothers during the initial stages of the pandemic, such as increased domestic and caregiving responsibilities, emotional labour, role strain from intensified career responsibilities, and the mental health strains that were experienced in the process. We also share our unique experiences as teachers and emerging scholars in this novel context and the complexities of navigating the demands placed upon us from ministerial and school administration in addition to

academia. Our experiences while managing these three primary roles highlight the demands that are largely shouldered by women and the institutional pressures that often impede on the act of mothering, which have all been exacerbated by the pandemic. We situate these experiences within the broader context of motherhood, educational institutions, and the pandemic.

Regardless of whatever plan to return to school we become informed of over the next week, we realize that we are privileged in many of the experiences we shared here. Although our statuses as mothers, teachers, and academics meant that we were taking on more caregiving and domestic responsibilities and shouldering the physical and psychological tolls of added pressures and expectations, we did not have to worry about meals and shelter. Even though our health was at times at risk due to potential exposure to the virus, we are not part of a medically vulnerable population, and we would have been able to seek and receive healthcare. We acknowledge the experiences of so many marginalized mothers, many of whom continue to move through the pandemic with their experiences silenced.

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## **Proving Our Maternal and Scholarly Worth: A Collaborative Autoethnographic Textual and Visual Storying of MotherScholar Identity Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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*Pivoting to remote work as female academics and to schooling our children from home as mothers in March 2020 marked a dramatic shift in how we enact our MotherScholar identities. This collaborative autoethnographic study employs a modification of interactive interviewing and photovoice to produce verbal and visual text of COVID-19 MotherScholar identity work for analysis. Thematic analysis results in themes of maternal interruptions, professional interruptions, maternal recognition, and professional recognition. Of note, our MotherScholar interactivity functioned as identity work as we sought and granted legitimacy to one another's COVID-19 MotherScholar identities. Of particular concern to us is how institutions of higher education are (dis)enabling socially supportive MotherScholar interactivity during COVID-19 conditions that persist at the time of this writing and how they intend to address social support needs sustainably into the future.*

“So, this is me from the other day. I was actually working on some data analysis for a project that I’m doing. It was a moment where I was like, ‘Wow, I haven’t been interrupted for thirty minutes.’ I had gotten so much done, and I miss this.”—Chrissy

We begin with an excerpt from Chrissy’s MotherScholar experience to emphasize COVID-19 and its disruptive consequences to the maternal and professional roles of academic mothers. In nonpandemic conditions, MotherScholar research has drawn attention to the tensions between role expectations and enactment as well as the blurring of their distinction, as one

role informs and, at times, enriches the other (Lapayese 52). Early indicators suggest that pandemic conditions are exacerbating tensions within the MotherScholar role (Kitchner; Minello; Uherezcky), which is why we began this collaborative autoethnographic study. To be a MotherScholar in COVID-19 conditions is a historically significant and consequential moment in our lifetimes, during which the distinction between MotherScholar identities is fractured, as mothering and professoring are accomplished in the same spaces, often simultaneously. The term “MotherScholar” is derived from research on mothers with academic positions in higher education; it was coined by Cheryl Mathias in 2011 and extended by Yvette Lapayese in 2012. This term is consistent with how other scholars use such terms as “faculty moms” (Swanson and Johnston 70) and “academic mothers” (Pillay). Although the early work on MotherScholars hyphenated the term to connote balance as the two identities interact, we choose to unhyphenate the term to connote a blending of identities as well as integration of maternal and scholarly pursuits (Burrow et al.; Pillay; Hirakata and Daniluk).

As MotherScholars ourselves, we experienced the blending of our maternal and professional selves when the coronavirus pandemic caused the closing of our universities in March 2020. Based on our experiences and emerging articles chronicling the challenges of remote academic work during the pandemic (see Kitchner; Uherezcky), our research purpose was to recount and highlight the uniqueness of remote academic work as mothers sheltering in place. To do so, we embarked on a collaborative autoethnographic project to both textually and visually express our maternal and scholarly experiences during the COVID-19 sheltering-in-place orders. In doing so, we extend the MotherScholar literature to include pandemic conditions under which these roles are enacted, and, simultaneously, we underscore the value of MotherScholar support networks to manage maternal and professional challenges.

We use the concept of “identity work” to illustrate the COVID-19-related challenges that we personally and professionally faced, and, to some degree, continue to face as the pandemic extends far beyond what we originally conceived. This study is organized as follows. To begin, we contextualize our study of the COVID-19 MotherScholar identity in social constructionist approaches to identity and identity work. From that work, we introduce the research questions guiding our inquiry. Then, we present the process of data collection and analysis in the methods section by clarifying how we used interactive interviews, photovoice, and thematic analysis. Following the methods section, we turn our focus to the two primary themes related to our maternal and professional identity work: interruptions and recognitions. Interruptions feature how our maternal and professional expectations, goals, and roles were disrupted as a result of COVID-19, and recognitions feature how we sought acknowledgment, appreciation, and respect for how we

overcame maternal and professional interruptions to fulfill our MotherScholar identities. The implications of these themes are explored, especially in relation to the MotherScholar identity work we did ourselves as coauthors. As mothers and scholars, we communicated our maternal and professional worthiness to one another, to our colleagues, to our children, to our partners, and among ourselves, as we both sought and granted MotherScholar legitimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, our conclusions highlight the value of MotherScholar identity work as legitimacy seeking and legitimacy granting. So to begin, we turn our attention to identity work and the context of MotherScholar identity work.

### **Literature Review: Identity Work**

The following section places the study in the larger context of literature on identity and identity work, and we then focus on the relevant MotherScholar literature. Identity scholarship, especially in the social sciences, has “become a popular frame through which to investigate a wide array of phenomenon” (Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas 5). Due to its popularity, scholars may take for granted what is meant by identity, identity work, and MotherScholar, which necessitates our clarifying these terms before we begin. With that said, we would like to note that there are not monolithic, singular definitions for any of these terms that would fully encapsulate what we intend as we use them. Identity is a ubiquitous, contemporary term hinting at a sense of self or a collective sense of a group. As social construction scholars (see Creed, Scully, and Austin; Tracy and Trethewey) suggest, how a sense of self or group is formed—through social interaction—is just as interesting as what the sense of self or group is.

### **MotherScholar Individual and Collective Identity**

MotherScholar is simultaneously an individual and collective identity designating academic mothers—those who enact maternal and scholarly roles concurrently. Women academics have made strides in representation in higher education, yet work remains in terms of securing better representation in certain disciplines as well as in upper-level administrative roles and in achieving equal pay (Pickerell). Although women begin academic careers in equal numbers at the assistant professor rank. American women drop to 42 per cent of faculty at the associate professor rank (Ward and Eddy). More recent data collected and reported by global nonprofit Catalyst indicates that in 2018, American women in the academy only made up 39 per cent of tenured positions, which indicates a 10 per cent drop in representation between obtaining a tenure-track position and achieving tenure. Of concern has been

the effect of maternity on the upward mobility of women academics. Mothers in the academy are noted as perceiving their maternal status and role responsibilities as obstacles to professional successes, such as achieving a specified publication record (Hirakata and Daniluk). Debra Swanson and Deirdre Johnston's study, which includes interviews with 95 mothers in the academy, concludes that investment in the maternal identity and internalized expectations of intensive mothering and the good mother are perceived as less valuable in the academy, increase stress related to unrealistic linear career progression, and undermine scholarly goals. Addressing this dilemma, some scholars (e.g., Lapayese; Pillay; Hirakata and Daniluk) suggest that identity integration—that is, avoiding balance and striving to integrate roles and expectations—may alleviate some of the distressing perceptions and outcomes associated with the MotherScholar. Lapayese, a scholar in education, explains it this way: “Mother-scholars expounded the implicit need for space that is ready and willing to integrate motherhood and research” (27). It is this vein of MotherScholar research that captures our attention, especially given that COVID-19 sheltering-in-place conditions likely affected the integration of maternal and scholarly identities, as they resulted in concurrently working and schooling from home.

At the individual level, MotherScholars negotiate and perform their identities from their individualized subject positions, which are uniquely constituted through diverse intersections of identities. For example, an immigrant single mother of two elementary-aged children on a green card with a nontenured faculty job has a different MotherScholar subject position than a minority married mother of two college-aged children with a tenured, full professor faculty job. However, MotherScholars are also a group of females who share maternal and academic roles and struggles associated with the uncertainties of fulfilling both roles (Grenier and Burke), having an outsider status in the academy (Iverson and Seher 63), experiencing double binds (Iverson and Seher 69), and fearing professional penalties for their mothering (Gerten; Ward and Wolf-Wendel). As an individual and collective identity, we recognize that there are institutional, occupational, political, and sociocultural influences (Kreiner et al. 1032) affecting our understandings of what it means to be a mother and scholar and the relevant role expectations associated with each. We also recognize that even collective identities are fragmented and individually negotiated, which is similar to Sarah Tracy and Angela Trethewey's crystallization metaphor describing multifaceted identity. Therefore, we blend the terms “mother” and “scholar” together, unhyphenated, to reflect the blended lived experiences of mother and scholar. Although Lapayese's work with the MotherScholar identity is foundational to our study, as well to other studies, she hyphenates the term. In contrast, we consciously choose to unhyphenate the term to emphasize the concurrent enactment and

mutual constitution of mothers and scholars. Such a linguistic move is in concert with Lauren Burrow et al.'s forthcoming work on the MotherScholar, which discusses unhyphenation and its attempt to transcend the balance metaphor that the hyphen implies.

As MotherScholars communicate maternal and work experiences, they engage in identity work. Identity work is the dynamic, ongoing (re)construction of one's identity (Alvesson and Willmott 625; Watson 126). Our dialogues illuminate how identity work stresses the multifaceted nature of identity, which we constructed not only through our own interactive interviews with one another but also through the internal discourse within ourselves (Tracy and Town) as we discursively worked towards coherent MotherScholar identities during COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, our identity work followed what Arlie Hochschild has called "compartmentalized identities"; during COVID-19, these compartments synthesized, resulting in identity work being both an external and internal process.

At the crux of this study is the MotherScholar identity work that we initiate and sustain through our communication, specifically about our COVID-19 MotherScholar experiences. As tenured and tenure-track faculty at regional universities in the disciplines of communication studies and education, we came together through our interpersonal and professional networks in May 2020 to begin discussing the MotherScholar in the COVID-19 pandemic, leading us to conduct a systematic study of our experiences, which are represented in this work. Guiding this iteration of our research are two fundamental curiosities or lines of inquiry. First, we asked, "How did we use our MotherScholar communication to manage our identities during the COVID-19 pandemic?" Second, we asked, "What were the consequences of our identity work?" Before addressing these questions, we turn our attention to the methods used for data collection and analysis.

## Methods

To address our question related to identity work in COVID-19 conditions, we drew on a larger body of research collected through an IRB approved collaborative autoethnographic project, in which we assumed roles as both researcher and participant. Undergirding our collaborative autoethnographic approach is that our MotherScholar identities are both preexisting contexts for the research and performative products of the research interactivity. By "preexisting contexts," we acknowledge that our MotherScholar identities predate our collaborative autoethnographic study and contextualize how we see our maternal and professional selves going into this project. By "performative products," we acknowledge that our MotherScholar identities are produced, reproduced, and transformed through our research interactions. Thus,

“identities are not fixed and constant but rather contextual products of the researcher’s relations” (Jensen, et al. 136). As we relate to one another as researchers in interactive interviews, we are engaged in identity work—(re) producing and transforming our MotherScholar individual and collective identities.

### **Interactive Interviewing as a Collaborative Autoethnographic Approach**

Autoethnography emerges from valuing personal experience, as it is a window into the “cultural beliefs, practices, and identities” of groups (Adams and Hermann 2). When two or more researchers share their experiences linked by a belief, practice, or identity in an autoethnographic study, the study becomes a collaborative venture. As MotherScholars, we bound together to share our collective identity as academic mothers and our COVID-19 experiences. Furthermore, we elected to produce our text for analysis through an interactive process rather than circulate prewritten accounts, which is consistent with Carolyn Ellis, Christine Kiesinger, and Lisa Tillmann-Healey’s interactive interviewing process. These scholars use interviews with one another and a conversation over dinner to create the texts for analysis in their chapter on autoethnography and emotion. We, too, use interviews with one another to produce the text for analysis.

Modifying and further specifying the interactive interview process, we, the authors, met via Zoom in an initial meeting to plan how we would approach the COVID-19 MotherScholar study and enact interactive interviewing. We settled on recorded Zoom video conferencing meetings facilitated by the lead author, Elizabeth Spradley. Prior to all three Zoom interactive interviews, Elizabeth created and circulated an interview guide to garner feedback and elicit preparation for each interactive interview. The interview guide allowed each of us to consider the images we might share and the way we might approach the questions or prompts scheduled in the interview guide. In each of the three interactive interviews, Elizabeth began by clarifying the interactive interview purpose and agenda. In the first interactive interview, Elizabeth asked each MotherScholar to take turns sharing her COVID-19 story; each showed images, including photographs of family time, home schooling, and different iterations of a home office. The second interactive interview focused on work-life issues and coping with COVID-19 conditions, and the third interview invited each MotherScholar to add to their narratives, clarify their experiences, and discuss the methodology. Interactive interviews averaged two hours in length and produced 324 pages of transcript.

In order to practice reflexivity (Berger), we wish to acknowledge some basic information about each of us because we are aware of the multiple influences these aspects of our identity have on our scholarly work. Elizabeth, Heather,

Lauren, and Chrissy are MotherScholars at a regional state university in the Southwest United States and represent two different academic disciplines, and Sarah is a MotherScholar at a Midwest regional university in the United States. Elizabeth is a forty-two-year-old white, cisgender woman, with four children, aged four, ten, twelve, and fourteen, who is tenured and applying for promotion at the time of this writing. Sarah, the second author, is a forty-four-year-old white, cisgender woman, with two children, aged three and six, who is intending to go up for tenure and promotion at the time of this writing. Heather is a forty-seven-year-old white, cisgender woman, with two adult children and one emergent adult child, aged seventeen, twenty, and twenty-three. Heather's children were three months, three, and six when she started her doctoral work; thus, the only professional identity and experience she knows is one in which mothering and scholarship coexist. Lauren, the fourth author, is a thirty-nine-year-old white, cisgender woman, with three children, aged eight, ten, and eleven, and has a tenured faculty position. Finally, Chrissy is a forty-one-year-old white, cisgender woman, with four children, aged nine, eleven, thirteen, and fourteen, with a tenured faculty position. We recognize the privileges inherent in our status as white, cisgender, able-bodied, and neurotypical women, who all currently have fulltime tenure-track positions at public, regional universities.

Additionally, MotherScholar data consisted of images of our COVID-19 experiences. We layered our verbal accounts of MotherScholar during the COVID-19 pandemic with images either captured organically during the pandemic or images staged to reflect our experiences; photos and social media posts comprised an important segment of our data. Moreover, these images function in two ways for us. First, the images function to enhance MotherScholar expressiveness through visual communication channels, as pioneered by Julie Rust (89). Second, the images function to generate social awareness and action for MotherScholars across the academy, as we exert influence on institutions of higher education to be attuned to MotherScholar needs, to adopt better policy, and to interact compassionately with faculty who have inequitable academic and maternal demands on their time and resources. The second functioning of our images is in concert with Caroline Wang and colleagues work with photovoice (Wang 186-87; Wang et al. 79). Following this and other iterations of this study, we make available a curated collection of our COVID-19 MotherScholar images on our blog (see conclusion for link). These images combined with language comprise the totality of texts examined for this study.

## **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis lent an accessible, flexible (Braun and Clarke 58), yet systematic approach to coding data, identifying patterns, and richly describing experience (Scheibling, et al. 54). Following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, we used the six-step iterative process for thematic analysis. First, Elizabeth and Sarah immersed themselves in the data, reading and rereading the interactive interview transcripts. Second, the lead author initiated the process of generating coding categories focusing on maternal and professional identities, which, third, led to emerging themes specific to our language use related to the interruptions and recognitions of maternal and professional identities. Quintessential to moving from step two and three, which we acknowledge is a recursive and active process, is noting the recurrence of codes and relationships between codes (Braun and Clarke 63; Manoliu 52). Fourth, the lead author used Braun and Clarke's (65) set of theme review questions to check the quality, relevancy, and saturation of them. Such questions as "Is this a theme?" and "What are the inclusionary and exclusionary boundaries of this theme?" were considered before settling on interruption and recognition themes (Braun and Clarke 65). Fifth, definition and labels were given to the themes settling on maternal interruptions, professional interruptions, maternal recognitions, and professional recognitions. Sixth, the draft of the findings and implications section was circulated to all authors for feedback and to consider such things as fit or match between themes and data, consistency of thematic reoccurrence in the data, ordering of themes, and selection of exemplary quotes (Braun and Clarke 69). The sixth stage also functioned similarly to member checking in that each of the collaborative coauthors had the opportunity to see themselves represented in the report to provide feedback on representation of their COVID-19 MotherScholar voices.

## **Findings**

The following subsections provide elaboration on the two themes of interruptions and recognition in terms of both maternal and scholarly identities.

### ***Maternal Interruptions***

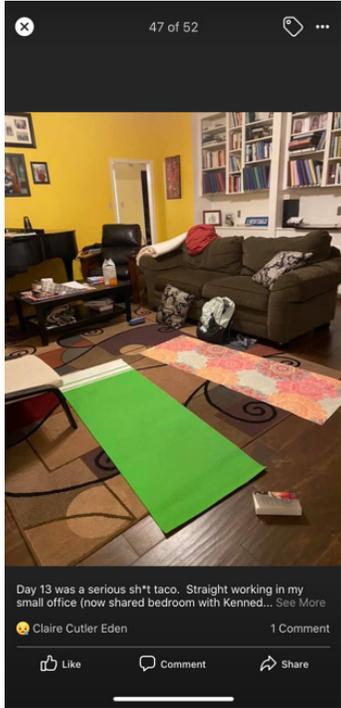
Maternal interruptions were coded in our data as events or descriptions about changes in how we mother from pre-COVID-19 to during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sheltering in place during COVID-19 meant two to three months of caring for children within the home, facilitating or managing children's schoolwork, and working remotely as academics. As Trisalyn Nelson and Jessica Early have pointed out in their *Chronicle of Higher Education* article: "The shift to remote work has been hard on every faculty member, and having

kids at home adds an extra layer of stress. That's true for all engaged parents, but the juggling is especially difficult for academic mothers who tend to bear the burden of home and kids much as they do in nonacademic families" (para. 3). Nelson and Early's point is evident in our visual and textual MotherScholar representations of interruption. Being a mother was wrought with many interruptions challenging our maternal identity work aimed at being a good mother. Homeschooling, or versions thereof, became a reality for us with school-aged children. Chrissy delved into the effect of homeschooling on both her maternal and professional identity: "Because that's what the virus closing has done. It has been a constant interruption. I have all these ideas and goals that I want for myself and it's not going to happen. It's not going to be the way I think it is and letting go of that and creating some live in the now moments has been good."

Chrissy's encapsulation of maternal interruptions was echoed by many of us as we described challenges in managing our work schedules and children's school schedules. We felt the totalizing effects of what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels describe as the "new momism" or what Sharon Hays terms "total motherhood." That is, we felt the overwhelming pressure to be good mothers by being good homeschoolers, yet our homes and work were not equipped with or arranged to easily accommodate this shift in maternal responsibilities. Our maternal interruptions, subsequently, became increasingly difficult to challenge in our identity work aimed at good mothering.

Although COVID-19 presented interruptions to *good* mothering, not all interruptions were perceived negatively. In fact, we all noted positive outcomes, even if limited, to some COVID-19 maternal interruptions. Heather said the following: "If a disruption can be positive, maybe it can be to my mothering. If this hadn't happened, I would have seen Kennedy twice during the whole semester instead of her being at home for ten weeks." She said the same for her other daughter but noted that her university was closer. Heather's maternal interruptions enabled shared mother-daughter yoga time in their living room and yielded additional conversations in the shared office/sleeping space (see Figures 1 and 2).

For Heather and for all of us, maternal interruptions were also opportunities for new iterations of our mothering. If not for COVID-19, Chrissy may not have unschooled with nature activities outside with her children, and Lauren may not have put down her computer for a family movie night. Overall, maternal interruptions typified COVID-19, but the degree to which we perceived them positively or negatively was, in part, the degree to which we were able to manage them as good mothers.



Figures 1 and 2. Heather's images of her Facebook post of the living room yoga setup and of her three kids all piled into her home office space, which her eldest daughter slept in while home from university.

## Professional Interruptions

Professional interruptions were coded in our data as events or descriptions that demonstrated a difference from pre-COVID-19 to during COVID-19. “Interruptions are continually happening,” Chrissy states. As scholars, we had personal and institutional expectations that were interrupted by COVID-19, which is aptly communicated by Chrissy in this orienting quote from the interviews. At the centre of these expectations were the subthemes of productivity and advancement. Regarding productivity, we often mourned workload versus work execution. At one point in our interactive interviews, Sarah exclaimed, “It was frustrating as hell that I couldn’t get work done.” Productivity did continue, but in several of our estimations, the productivity was so intensely different that we felt overwhelmed by what was not being fulfilled regarding our professional expectations of role performance. On top of mourning our changing productivity, we also experienced the need to justify ourselves through excuses. As Chrissy said, “I’m just going to have to continue making excuses and saying, ‘I’m not going to be able to do that. I’m sorry that I missed your email. I’m sorry I did this. I’m sorry that I did that.’ And this is going to happen as long as I have to be mother that stays home with my kids . . . I don’t know the end date for that.”

Our loss of productivity was a professional disruption with implications for our advancement, not just job and personal satisfaction. Furthermore, in most cases, professional interruptions were attributed to our maternal identity and role responsibilities (see Figure 3)



Figure 3. Chrissy with one of her four children in view as she works on her laptop.

Regarding advancement, we each expressed concerns that our professional goals were impeded by the effects of mothering and working from home. Whether advancement concerns were specific to the timing of tenure and promotion or general to our reputations, we shared concerns that COVID-19 interrupted advancement. Speaking about a personal goal to go up for full professor by a certain age, Lauren stated, “That’s not going to happen right now. So, I’m kind of giving myself a little bit of a break and maybe, foolishly, I think I can jump back in.” For Elizabeth, she began the academic year filled with professional goals that would favourably position her for promotion: “This was going to be the first year that all four kids were in school full-time and at the same school. So, for one year I was going to have them at the same place. I was excited about the possibilities of this academic year. For me, this academic year was about renewed interest in my research agenda, having additional time to dedicate to it.” Like her coauthors, COVID-19 interrupted several research projects requiring participant observation in the data collection. Of note, this writing group of coauthors sprung up in the gap left by research interruptions, and we will expand upon the unintentional and positive outcomes associated with that outcome in the implication section.

While specific interruptions to promotion emerged in our talk, more generally concerns emerged related to the short-term and long-term effect that COVID-19 would have on our scholarly reputations as we struggled to maintain workloads and pursue advancement. Bravely, Chrissy claimed that her “reputation will be damaged.” We shuddered to think about the long-term effects of scholarly identity shifts, but for some of us, the forecast did not call for clear skies anytime soon. In sum, we shared maternal and professional interruptions with one another and voiced the perceived threats to our MotherScholar identities.

### **Maternal Recognitions**

Maternal recognitions were coded as events or descriptions of extraordinary maternal activity to enhance family relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. As mothers, we sought recognition through acknowledgement, appreciation, and respect for our maternal activity during these times. Maternal recognition foregrounded our maternal identity work that sought to both normalize and generate extraordinary pandemic experiences. Normalizing sheltering-in-place conditions with our families manifested in our maternal role performances in several different ways, including facilitating routines in our homes, maintaining family time for mundane activities, such as meals or walks, keeping up with domestic labour, and talking to our children about the pandemic. Out of concern for our children, whose worlds had been turned upside down as well, we strove to generate safe, calm, and happy homes.

In addition to normalizing sheltering-in-place conditions with our families, we also strove to construct extraordinary experiences. From making elaborate food to doing unique family activities, we engaged in maternal identity work that reinforced positive impressions of our maternal roles to ourselves and our families. In terms of food, two of us, unbeknownst to each other, selected images of extravagant dishes we made for our family to show during the interactive interviews describing our desire to be good moms and make our homes special during the pandemic. Elizabeth displays images of food that she made, explaining, “I made us really elaborate meals.” Likewise, Sarah described making two versions of whoopie pies, one for her daughters and the other for her and her spouse (see Figures 4 and 5).



Figures 4 and 5. Images from Elizabeth of an elaborate dessert, (flourless chocolate cake and coffee ice cream) and breakfast (English muffins with eggs, cheese sauce, and bacon).

Food preparation was not the only extraordinary maternal activity; we also described how we spent time with our families doing activities that we did not do before the pandemic. In terms of extraordinary family activities, Lauren expounded upon her commitment to uninterrupted family time by putting technology away to enjoy movie night, and Sarah sat down with her three- and six-year-old to play tea party. Despite maternal and professional interruptions, maternal recognition was transformative and acted as a salve for our COVID-19 wounds.

## Professional Recognitions

The final realm of our identity work was our need to seek professional recognition, or to have our scholarly work and contributions acknowledged either by those in our department, colleagues on social media, or even our respective universities. As reports from issues of higher education magazines (Kitchner; Uherezky) have made clear, article submissions from women academics have declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, we wanted to communicate to others that we weren't the norm and that our universities needed to keep us. Despite our remote working conditions and our enacting maternal and professional identities simultaneously, we all noted various feats we had accomplished and the desire to have our institutions acknowledge and value those accomplishments. Heather put it bluntly, "I need to prove that I'm worth keeping around." At another point in our interactive interviews, Sarah similarly explained how she demonstrated her worthiness to her department as she responded to Lauren's experience with recognition seeking. "That's interesting, Lauren, because I find as one of two junior faculty members in the department that I'm volunteering to do whole lot more than I'm expected to do to prove my worth. And, I say, 'Hey, not only can I advise students for twenty hours a week, but my three- and six-year old are still healthy and thriving.'" Given the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and other news sources reporting about school closures, hiring freezes, and layoffs, we were all too aware of threats to our professional identities (e.g., Kelderman; Redden; and Sultan). Engaging in identity work for professional recognition enabled a sense of active work to address those threats.

Seeking professional recognitions operated on an interpersonal level (e.g., department chair) and organizational level (e.g., department or university community). On an interpersonal level, we described the need for professional recognition. Take, for example, Sarah's familiar ritual with her department chair: "I feel like my professional life is suffering to the point where I was on the phone with my acting chair about something completely different last week. And I said, 'I am afraid I'm going to lose my job because I'm not tenured yet,' and he had to remind me that I had nothing to worry about. And I need to hear that once a month." In addition to interpersonal communication seeking professional recognition, we also voiced the need for our accomplishments to be recognized at organizational levels. Whether it was an email to faculty or an announcement on the university's internal newsletter, we expressed how affirming organizational recognitions were to our scholarly identities. Lauren described organizational level recognition as she discussed how she circulated information about a professional accomplishment:

I was big on making sure that made it into the *SFA Today*.... Well, they cannot fire someone who's been talked about at the board of

regents meeting and president listed by name.... I made sure my name was out there... I'll be really honest. I liked what I did, and it was a really great night. I don't normally shout from the rooftops about what I've done, but I felt like I needed to show everything I'm doing right now and what worth it was to SFA and make sure to copy everybody on it.

By proving our worth by pointing out our accomplishments, we engaged in identity work to counter threats of interruption. In the next section, we expound upon our COVID-19 MotherScholar identity work by turning our attention to how our identity work functioned with one another as a writing team.

### **Implications**

In the implications section, we direct our thoughtfulness to the second question that drove this study: What were the consequences of our identity work? To do so, we explored how our MotherScholar identity work surrounding interruptions and recognitions functioned. We found it functioned as both legitimacy seeking and legitimacy granting, subsequently underscoring the instrumentality of MotherScholar social support.

In many ways, we came to realize through data analysis that we were seeking acknowledgement, affirmation, and praise from others. Legitimizing accounts can work differently across social and relational contexts, but as Douglas Creed, Maureen Scully, and John Austin conclude legitimating accounts demonstrate the way “social actors use their knowledge of cultural logics and institutional settings to provide the common meanings and identities that mobilize local participation in sustaining or changing institutional arrangements” (476). Our legitimating accounts drew on cultural and institutional scripts of motherhood and professorship to relate to one another and seek support for COVID-19 MotherScholar identity shifts.

When we began this study, we did not ask questions about or intend to explore how our interactive interviews functioned as identity work, nor did we plan on examining the consequences of the identity work for one another. Our initial focus was to be on the inevitable tensions between maternal and professional roles—that is, work-life tensions. However, as with all communication, there are intentional and unintentional consequences, and as scholars, we had an informed curiosity about the consequences of our interactions. The more we immersed ourselves in one another's COVID-19 MotherScholar experiences, the more we observed how our communication as a MotherScholar writing team functioned as a social support network granting legitimacy to our MotherScholar identity work. In Lauren's words, “I made a choice right now to stay in this work group because it is actually very

therapeutic.” Borrowing Lauren’s phrase, our interactions and MotherScholar identity work were therapeutic.

Just as we sought legitimacy, our identity work granted legitimacy. Legitimacy-granting communication was typically in response to a MotherScholar challenge with which we identified. For example, Lauren offered legitimacy to Sarah’s guilt from competing maternal and professional expectations: “I’m having flashbacks. I don’t know if that’s comforting, Sarah, that they will get older.” Legitimacy granting was orally affirming as in Lauren’s reaction to Sarah’s guilt, but legitimacy granting was also present in our Zoom chat as we listened to one another. In response to Elizabeth’s account of her son’s health condition that predated remote schooling for her family, Lauren wrote: “I was wrapped up in your story so much—lots of love to you too. We are all in this together NOW.” In our struggles to manage maternal and professional interruptions and in our pursuit of maternal and professional recognition, we became relational resources for one another as we used legitimacy-granting communication to affirm one another’s MotherScholar worthiness.

While somewhat surprising to us, the MotherScholar literature provides tentative support for this outcome. Christin Seher and Susan Iverson’s work with academic mothers in a program called Action Read demonstrates how facilitated dialogue about maternal and professional roles in higher education can benefit academic mothers. Their study notes social and professional benefits, such as co-mentoring, joint consciousness raising, and validation, and their study also suggests that meaningful collective action may result to mobilize MotherScholars on their campuses. Our COVID-19 MotherScholar writing team functioned similarly as the women in Action Read, which caused us to wonder what would happen if MotherScholars across the academy formed such writing teams.

Furthermore, one of the MotherScholars stood out in her fulfillment of an informal, emergent role in our MotherScholar research team. The informal, emergent role was that of “affirmer.” We adopt this term, as it describes Lauren’s communication and our perception of Lauren as the affirmer while realizing that group communication scholars (Hare; Moxnes) may classify the role slightly differently. Lauren’s comments in response to our COVID-19 MotherScholar expressions affirmed who we were, the choices we were making as well as our emotional reactions and concerns.

## **Conclusion**

Regardless of our subject positions (e.g. academic rank or family situation), COVID-19 threatened perceptions of our maternal and scholarly worthiness. Subsequently, we voiced our struggles with interruption and our efforts to seek

recognition, which came to function within our group as legitimacy-seeking and granting-identity work. This study suggests that pandemic-related exigencies that dramatically alter work and family arrangements may also dramatically alter identity. As a microcosm of MotherScholar identity work during the COVID-19 pandemic, our research and writing team operated as legitimacy granting in response to the legitimacy-seeking identity work, which underscores the value of even limited interactivity and social support for working mothers, more generally, and MotherScholars, more specifically. Overall, the early findings related to maternal wellbeing show that the physical, financial, and psychological dimensions of wellbeing have suffered during the pandemic (Davenport et al.). With this and early indicators of research of academic mothers during COVID-19, higher education administrators need to take note of how their faculty may be struggling with MotherScholar legitimacy and wellbeing as they teach, serve, and research remotely while simultaneously fulfilling maternal expectations with children at home. Additionally, MotherScholars should take note that they do not need to wait for their respective institutions to implement measures for their wellbeing. Instead, research and writing teams may be initiated and formed from within the MotherScholar community. This writing team focused on COVID-19 and the MotherScholar, but research and writing teams may choose to be primarily sources of feedback on projects or pursue projects related to their disciplines. Regardless, from our anecdotal experience and extant literature on MotherScholar groups (see Seher and Iverson), social support is a promising outcome.

We acknowledge that MotherScholar challenges existed before COVID-19, but in light of the pandemic's exacerbation of existing challenges, attention to MotherScholar identity shifts and social support is critical. Of significance to institutions of higher education, opportunities for MotherScholar interaction are limited in remote work conditions yet are still critical to manage identity shifts and enhance social support. Although a limited number of MotherScholars may fall under the category of disadvantaged populations or resource-poor communities (in the sense that Jewel Gausman and Ana Langer call for a gender lens for COVID-19 research), there are many statuses and differences between these women that place them at varying degrees of risk to their wellbeing. Greater attention is needed to investigate how disparity or minority status affects MotherScholar identity in a pandemic. We see our work as both a critical dialogue about MotherScholars and as a critical practice by modelling a MotherScholar writing team, which will encourage a "praxis of engagement" (Garvey et al. 141) at colleges and universities by MotherScholars. Our own COVID-19 MotherScholar stories can be found in our MotherScholar blog, available at <https://espradley0.wixsite.com/mysite-1>.

In sum, COVID-19 MotherScholar conditions were not of our making or

choosing, and as we textually and visually expressed our identities to one another we produced, reproduced, and transformed individually and collectively, working through the pandemic-induced identity shifts. Through our communication we also experienced affirmation and support that enabled continued productivity leading to this article. In an active attempt to avoid romanticizing COVID-19 MotherScholar identity work, we wrestled with how to frame the positive outcome of legitimacy seeking and granting within our writing team. Yet we confess that maternity can have an “expansive” (Laney et al.) effect on our careers and vice versa, which is further realized in relation to other MotherScholars. So, we leave with a parting quote from our interactive interviews, which, partially, explains this “expansive” perspective: “I think that is the MotherScholar. It’s that I think of things differently.”

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## **Unseen Roles of Women during COVID-19: How the Echo of an “Mummy, I Love You” from a Six-Year-Old during a Zoom Meeting Redefined Mothering**

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*I was in my last year of my doctoral studies, my children's school plans were scheduled, and I had just begun a new research collaboration when COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. My roles as a mother, researcher, and educator, which once segregated by time and place, collided when our university closed. Every aspect about each role merged, and my professional and personal world collided in an online meeting. This is a visual essay consisting of photographs, artwork, and poetry collected during the pandemic as I journeyed through my doctoral journey at home. I invite the reader to read my spoken words aloud and allow your experiences and emotions as a mother(parent), a researcher, and educator to permeate the space around you.*

This visual essay presents photographs of the messiness of my role as a mother, a researcher, and an educator. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, each of the roles I practiced in my life was quite separate. My mothering role was usually constrained to mealtimes, after-school activities, weekend school projects, bedtime stories, and kisses before bedtime. My researching role was confined to the university, where I attended weekly meetings with fellow researchers, collected data, and wrote quietly. My educating role meant meeting my students during planned office hours, teaching weekly classes, and conducting thesis coaching workshops. These three roles were defined and segregated and never seemed to converge in place or time. My role as a mother was not visible to my colleagues when I was researching and my role as researcher was not visible when I was mothering. After COVID-19 became a pandemic mothers like me were asked to work from home, and, quickly, my role as a mother, researcher, and educator converged and was made visible after the echo of my

six-year old son's "Mummy, I love you" was heard over a Zoom meeting. In this visual essay, I present a combination of images and textual parts of the "messiness" of my role in mothering, researching, and educating. These images and texts were collected and documented after COVID-19 became a pandemic to reveal how each role informed the other, and, more importantly, how these roles were made visible to inform and disrupt a patriarchal working system.

When I first read Joanne Detore-Nakamura's chapter "Dissertation Distress: A Room of One's Own with a Crib and a Computer," I was considering going back to graduate school to pursue a second doctorate, this time in education. I was eight-months pregnant with my second son and thoughts of research, fulltime work, elder caregiving, and writing with two young children seemed impossible to balance and achieve. But my heart struggled to reconcile my desire to pursue an academic path and my commitment to being a good mother. Like Detore-Nakamura's feelings of guilt, my feelings of guilt for my academic pursuits were equal in magnitude to my feelings of guilt for neglecting my two young children. After long discussions with my husband, we decided I would go back to school to pursue my passion for research in science education. My true inspiration for pursuing graduate work in this field came from the birth of my older son, who challenged my views of motherhood and questioned my worldviews.

It was the fall of 2013 when I decided to apply for graduate school in a program that was not my expertise. I spent many weeks researching educational philosophy and science education journal articles to give me enough insight and background to write an academically sound personal statement to be included with my application. In between sleepless nights, breastfeeding, diaper changes, and minding a four-year old, I successfully completed my application for graduate school the following year. Up until March 2020, before COVID-19 had been declared a pandemic in British Columbia, my research, teaching, working, and mothering had its place, or, at least, I felt each was separate enough that snack time and pretend play occurred at home, researching and writing happened mostly on campus, and working happened in the office. Time, place, and distance seemed to keep my roles as a mother, researcher, and educator separate. On March 16, 2020, my university closed, and everyone was asked to work from home; public schools announced they were closing for the rest of the school year. Public libraries also closed, and children were prohibited from accessing public playgrounds; community centers cancelled all spring and summer camp programs. Chaos, panic, uncertainty, doubt, fear, anger, sadness, futility, frustration, and Zoom took over our household. I was inspired by Elizabeth Ashworth's work on cathARTic, which is "a way to share personal and professional layers of [the] academic journey" (459) through a blending of text and imagery. I was specifically drawn to this approach because words alone cannot easily

demonstrate the magnitude of love and patience I experienced from my family as I mother, research, and educate. This visual essay presents images, textual expressions, and art created by me and my children to show the reader the messiness of being a mother, researcher, and educator at home during a pandemic. I invite the audience to read the text out loud and experience their emotions and reflections through the images.

## The Scholar Space

*Working at/in/from home*

*Clutter, chaos, messiness*

*How can I hide my background?*

*What else can I get my kids to do while I am  
in a meeting?*

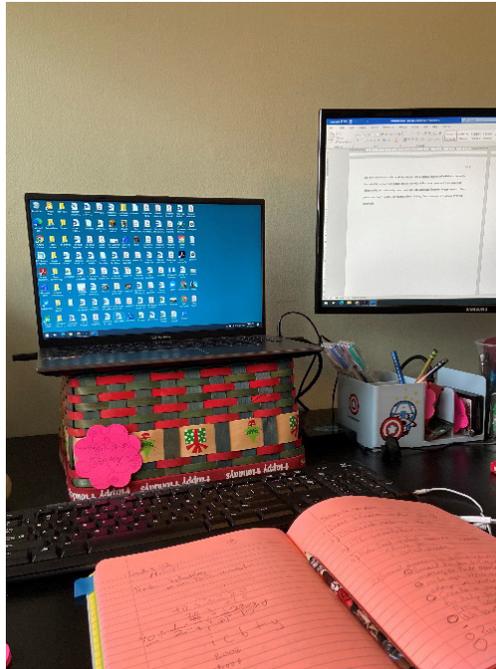
*What would they think if my son comes in?*

*When can I take a break?*

*What should I make for lunch?*

*Where is the cat?*

*Is this scholarly?*

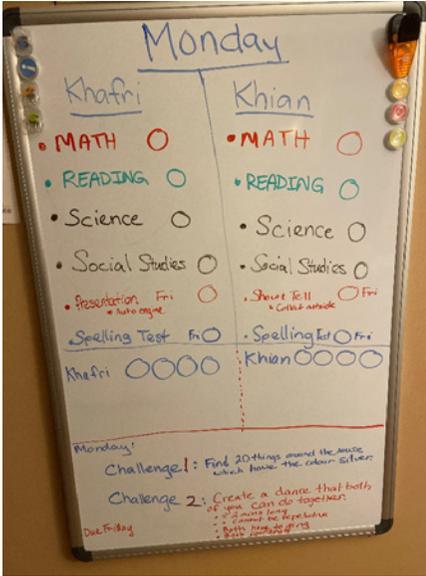


My home office is a cluttered desk space.

### Keeping Up Expectations and ...

*I must keep things in place, and  
I cannot miss that meeting,  
My kids must keep up their learning.  
The whiteboard must be filled.*

*What are other parents doing?  
What is the best time to Zoom?  
I am not a teacher, but my kids must learn?  
Must schedule clean up hour after dinner!  
Must schedule for tomorrow! They must be  
learning during school time.*



Left: An example of a daily scheduling as an attempt to be organized from March to April 2020; Right: Project 1: Arts project. Learning to sew.



Left: Project 2: Science experiment. Learning about chromatography; Right: Keeping up with extracurricular lessons after breakfast.



Project 3: Problem-solving project using engineering ideation. Building a 45° racetrack with limited materials.

**... and Becoming Exhausted and Frustrated**

*Overwhelmed  
Over exhausted  
Over worked  
Over expected.*

*Who's expectations? Who is watching? Who is checking? Why am I overworked?  
Who is making me feel overwhelmed? Are my peers overwhelmed as well?*

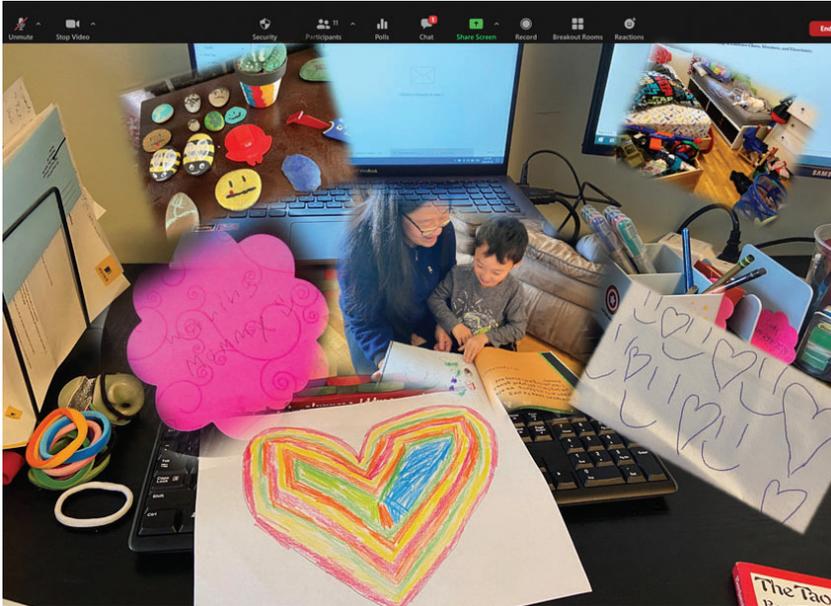
*Who is watching anyway?*

*Who is counting?*

*I need a break, a breather, I want to build projects with my children, I want to  
explore experiments with them, I do not have time for that whiteboard.*

*Where are MY hugs and kisses?*

**Learning to Embrace Chaos, Messiness, Uncertainty as a Mother,  
Researcher, and Educator**



## A Critical Moment of Reflection, Acceptance, Vulnerability, and Love.

*May 21, 2020*

*1:17pm PST*

*Zoom Meeting*

*I was presenting my work and research to my colleagues.*

*My office door was closed.*

*I hear a slight creaking as the door slowly opened, and I quickly waved my hand off camera to gesture my son to leave the office.*

*I sensed his presence still without turning my head, and again, shook and waved my hand hoping he would leave the office.*

*"Mummy! I love you! Mummy!" he spoke loudly and swiftly pulled the door closed.*

*I quickly turned my head but only heard his footsteps dissipate as he ran away.*

*I smiled. My colleagues smiled.*

*I paused.*

*My heart is full.*

*"I love you too, my little bean!" I called aloud.*

Note: All photographs were taken by the author.

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ALEXANDRA KISITU

## **Viral Loads and Immunities: Reflecting on Neoliberalism, Motherhood, and Academia during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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*This creative, reflection paper explores neoliberalism in academia and motherhood, and it speaks from my position as a thirty-three-year-old mother of two young children (aged six and four) and as an ABD (all but dissertation) graduate student in sociology and women's studies. My family and I currently live in the Twin Cities metro area of Minnesota. I am a white (Irish and Lebanese), and my husband is Black (from Uganda). I grew up in a single-parent household and my husband, who grew up in Uganda, was orphaned at a very young age. Though different in terms of our social environments, we both experienced debilitating poverty as children. As the pandemic ravages on and instability becomes familiar to us yet again, I explore the precarious situation of being captured in the neoliberal pressures of education and motherhood while attempting to artistically and intuitively explore spaces outside of these realms to better my relationship with my work, my children, my body, my partner, and myself. I explore these concepts alongside the COVID-19 pandemic and how the entanglements of neoliberalism, work, motherhood, academia, and racism intersect in my family's lives. I also explore the role mothers (myself included) have in supporting family health, as well as the outside pressures, that create tension in the achievability of optimal family health and wellness. I explore these issues context of the current pandemic and the current racial and political climate in the United States as I raise my mixed race children during this time.*

It was March when things changed. The snow was melting. The birds came back from down south. The sun was rising earlier each day. Being outdoors was more and more comfortable after the long, cold winter. The wind became warm again. And, then, suddenly we were ordered to stay inside. The virus had reached the United States; schools were ordered to close, and people rushed to get supplies to endure weeks of quarantine. The world became so

uncertain overnight. It was always uncertain for most humans, but we just couldn't avoid it any longer.

My two young children, who had just started their first year of school, began their distance learning program effective immediately. My husband continued to work outside the home as an essential worker. And I—a PhD candidate in sociology and a women's studies lecturer, who was just beginning to get a grasp on dissertation writing—had to slam on the breaks. There were no more days of researching, preparing articles, reading, or working on my analysis while the kids were off learning. No more progress on my papers. No more research. No more writing. My days were suddenly filled with attending Google meets and Zoom meetings, completing kindergarten math homework, preparing snacks, doing laundry, practicing ABCs, lots of baking, checking the news, scrambling to answer emails, researching how to boost my family's immune system, ordering online groceries, conducting language arts and science lessons, and, of course (along with moms everywhere), experiencing sheer panic.

Many questions circulated in my mind day in and day out. How does one live through a global pandemic? How does one mother through a pandemic? How do parents manage fulltime work from home? How do they manage their children's education, manage the household chores, manage emotions, manage bills, manage the effects of a faltering economy, manage family health, manage emails, manage getting enough time outdoors, manage new social protocols, manage loss, manage unpredictability, manage laundry, manage mowing the lawn, manage racism, manage love, manage living in 2020?

Weeks of staying at home turned into months, with state governments across the United States and the world flirting with reopening and shutting down and reopening again. We received a stimulus check in April 2020. Pennies to help us get by. Then, in May, George Floyd was murdered in my home state. Summer 2020 was one we will never forget. The protests and riots began, and more division followed. We were under curfew. The national guard came in. White supremacists and looters seemed to almost take over for a bit. The worry for my family's safety grew exponentially with each passing day. The nation was faced with a mirror to look at itself. Some people wanted to break the mirror. Others decided to put on makeup to make their reflection look better. Still, others stared into that mirror for so long that they could finally see the soul of nation—they could finally tap into it and transform it. That buzzing energy of change on the horizon was so potent in the air then. I can still taste it now. After all, it is only September at the time of writing this.

As a medical sociologist, PhD candidate, and mother, all of the changes our society has rapidly experienced have been incredibly thought provoking and emotionally jolting. Issues of racism, economics, healthcare, and class, to name only a few, suddenly became mainstream conversations and exploded all

over social media. I often imagine the incredible journal articles that could come from this time. But I also often imagine the incredible difficulties that mothers, myself included, would have writing them while they shoulder the work of taking care of their home and children. Many have already addressed how the pandemic has set women back as they lose access to childcare and have increased family and domestic responsibilities during this time. We know now what mothers and caretakers have known all along—the labour economy will crumble without the care economy. Yet, I wonder why we aren't widely addressing the fact that women are, and have been, crumbling under the pressures of both the labour and the care economy?

Mothers in academia, too, have been screaming from the rooftops for far too long about the imbalance of work and family obligations. Yet, the pressures of academia, sadly, do not end because of pandemics. We were all expected quickly to shift classes online (if they weren't already) with very little help in the beginning. Those who were doing in person research and data collection had to stop; we suddenly had significantly less time to write, and we had to worry about an increasingly bleak job market as well as budget cuts to our departments. Mothers in academia continue to feel the pressure to produce at the same rate as those who do not have carework, perhaps even more so, with impending hiring freezes and other economic restructuring measures. For example, pandemic-related department cuts at my university are targeting humanities and social sciences, where women are more prevalent and accomplished. I often wonder during this time, where is the support for women, for PhD candidates, and for mothers in academia?

My curiosities led me to consider the intersections of academia, motherhood, and neoliberalism. Peter Kaufman writes that neoliberalism is the project of deregulating such industries as food, drugs, and finance, while privatizing such things as education, social services, and healthcare. Neoliberalism also encourages (or perhaps makes necessary) the marketization of social life and social relations. Individualism is favoured, as neoliberalism “promotes the total free will of individuals as economic actors” (Kaufman). Such ideology in action suggests that one's professional, economic, and social status is solely the result of individual action (or inaction). Irem Güney-Frahm writes that neoliberalism relies on individualization; thus, “the responsibility to manage one's daily life and to make the right choices is largely left to each individual” (847). Neoliberalism, therefore, at its core takes an agentic approach to social problems without fully recognizing the structural factors affecting individuals; thus rendering social structures, institutions, and economic elites innocent and free of responsibility. Although neoliberalism seems attractive with its freewill, individualistic type approach, Andrew Seal suggests that neoliberalism is aimed at restoring power to economic elites, not empowering individuals.

Neoliberalism, like a virus, seeps into everyday life and attempts to co-op the humanity of the people it touches. This is true in academia where fast knowledge production has become economically and professionally paramount to work-life balance, community, wisdom, student success, teaching, activism, and bettering humanity. Vidya Ashram argues that the making of knowledge is now turned “against the producers of knowledge in the service of global capital and global machines of violence” (65). The knowledge producer now becomes a sort of factory worker who quickly produces economically viable information. The right to one’s own knowledge and wisdom is, therefore, surveiled and stripped, which is evidenced through restrictive employment contracts, institutional review board policies, grants, and corporate sponsored departments. Evelyn Morales Vazquez and John Levin argue that “These practices colonize the academic profession through the establishment and propagation of evaluation systems and metrics of accountability that recognize only the characteristics of the ideal entrepreneurial worker, and quantifiable actions such as publishing and securing grant funding.” The resulting stress, anxiety, mental health issues, and negativity are not adequately addressed because then the neoliberal policies and actions would have to be addressed and recognized for what they truly are: violent, exploitative, and disempowering. Yet, if one cannot keep up with the amount and the right types of knowledge production and academic behaviour, they perish in such a system. Knowledge production, therefore, becomes economic exploitation in the neoliberal university (Ashram).

The pressure to produce, as well as the amount of time and energy it takes to produce knowledge, will always be in competition with motherhood. Many would argue that motherhood requires patience, time, love, and energy. It seems unimaginable that any one person could fulfill the role as a neoliberal knowledge producer in the university setting and in the same instance have the energy and time for mothering. Neoliberal policies, however, have been meticulously designed so that mothers are forced to do both (and to an extraordinary degree). And if one should choose to only be a mother, student debt is one of the many brilliant motivational tools the masters use to pull mothers from their children and force them to engage in fast-paced knowledge production in academia—a truly cruel symptom of the pestilence that is neoliberalism.

COVID-19, another awful virus, has also arguably increased neoliberal pressures in academia. Mothers, many of whom are now overseeing their children’s education from home, have taken on increased domestic responsibilities, including managing their family’s health, while they compete with others in academia who do not have care or domestic responsibilities and, therefore, may have more time to produce given the stay-at-home orders and the shift to working from home. Equally concerning is the extreme economic

fallout that will most likely affect mothers, as only the most economically viable knowledge producers will be protected from job loss and paycuts. Although some mothers may be in this rare group of producers, most mothers will have to (and perhaps have already had to) choose between their career and their family responsibilities. Politically, economically, and socially, the response to COVID-19 feels like another attack on mothers and caretakers, unfortunately.

Neoliberalism, in its viral pathway, expands beyond the tensions between motherhood and academia; it is ever present in the ideal mother archetype from which society measures all mothers against. Güney-Frahm reflects on neoliberal motherhood and critiques the idealized mother figure that persists even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we know that carework (both paid and unpaid) has been keeping the economy afloat (even prepandemic), the way this care is done is not immune to neoliberal expectations and ideations. The way mothers are expected to care and how they embody the concept of motherhood has been shaped significantly by policies, expectations, and advertisements that urge women to “be multitasking, powerful individuals who can have it all: family, a good job, a fit body, good social relations” (Güney-Frahm 849). This means that motherhood is professionalized in such a way that mothers are expected to learn about pregnancy, have a stable income, practice attachment parenting, become experts on child development, maintain a fit and sexually attractive body (a concept that is so very fluid in real life), teach their children from home, prepare organic meals, and keep a clean, safe home.

Güney-Frahm argues that the professionalization of motherhood means that mothers are expected to be experts on their children’s lives. One would think the pandemic would give relief to such expectations; however, women are arguably more pressured during this time to become experts on their children’s lives, their own careers (if they have them), and their children’s education (if they are distance learning) all while maintaining a clean home, a fit body, positive mental health, and superb family health and wellness. Neoliberalism tells mothers that if they do not succeed and excel at all of these, it is their individual fault for the failure. If her body isn’t fit, if her children have too much screen time, if she is too tired for intimacy with her partner (if she has one), if she is struggling with poor mental health, if her house is messy, if she cannot afford healthy foods, and if (God forbid) her family gets sick with COVID-19, these are all the mother’s fault in the virulent neoliberal era. Even if partners or helpers do take some of the work off of our plates, we know that the work is unpaid, strenuous, and hard. It is difficult to give this work up because we don’t want them to suffer too; yet, regardless, we always endure the mental load of managing motherhood (unless we are cognitively incapable).

With the present political, social, and racial climate in the United States, more mothers are also assuming the burden of deconstructing white supremacy and racism in their families (although many mothers have always had this burden). In my family, this has always been a reality to some degree as my husband is Black and I am white. Our children are brown skinned. They are Black in America. We know that racism is another infection we must work to rid from our society. Another pandemic. Another pestilence, but certainly not novel. We have felt the effects of this virus on my family. And, yet neoliberalist trickery has found a way to co-op the dismantling of white privilege and supremacy in America. Instead of addressing this pandemic of racism—ridding it from our institutions and social relations and acknowledging the dignity and importance of Black lives—economic and political elites have used social media and other measures to effectively divide people and place the responsibility of racial healing and reconciliation upon individuals and racialized communities.

For white people, dismantling white privilege in the neoliberal era becomes a project whereby it is the individual's responsibility to deconstruct racial privilege and white supremacy through becoming the best ally, best consumer, best activist, the most read, or the quickest person to cancel others who don't subscribe to this internal work. This work is vital, of course, but it encourages only those willing and privileged enough to do it and those willing to perform the individualistic stylization of antiracism work. This work, thus, results in a competition to become the best white person (which ironically only centres white people more). We expect that white mothers of white children teach their children about racism, racialized police violence, and white privilege, which is a necessary start to dismantling racism. But these messages, I am afraid, are not strong enough medicine to heal the whole system, as they are co-opted by neoliberal individualization. How do I, then, as a white mom with mixed race children tell my sweet babies that I cannot cure this sickness that will undoubtedly plague them? This is what neoliberalism does: It makes the individual powerless while promoting the myth that we are individually in charge of and responsible for all decisions and outcomes. Once we debunk this myth, we realize that we also need larger structural changes in education, politics, the military, policing, economics, healthcare, and social relations. We need community, connection, and reconciliation. We need accountability and change from the political and economic gatekeepers.

It seems that if we do not keep a healthy immune system and a healthy society, we will continue to succumb to the variety of viruses that plague our world today. It is becoming more apparent that the way neoliberal policies are carried out today are harmful to the human mind, body, and soul. This sort of sickness prevades and infects motherhood and academia, which should be spaces of freedom, love, and dignity. The competition for who is the best

producer, the best mother, the best scholar, the best antiracist, and the best fill-in-the-blank strips us of our humanity, our mental health, our physical health, our intellectual health, and our family health. The exhaustion of participating in this neverending competition and neoliberal reality is taking its toll on our bodies, our relationships, our work, and our society. As mothers, these pressures create challenges for the achievability of optimal family health and wellness, which is vital during a pandemic. As mothers, if we are expected to take care of our children's health and our family health, how can we do so without allowing neoliberalism from infecting our homes? How can we support the physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and social health of our families when society feels as though it is crumbling, when we feel as though we are crumbling?

I am always in awe of the strength of mothers. Even when we feel we are crumbling, we find a way to reorganize and rebuild. I am reminded often of the lessons of birth—of relying on faith and love to endure the waiting, the pain, the unknown, as well as the feeling of splitting and crumbling in our bodies, our identities, our energy. Yet, if we are lucky enough, we always find a way to get through and to protect our children somehow. We find sacred spaces in our day and in our lives. We somehow protect those spaces with love and comfort, even during the most trying of times. I think we can all feel to some extent the colonization of neoliberalism in our lives, but we are also intuitively aware that there are spaces and opportunities outside of this pestilence. Motherhood reminds us to keep connecting, a spit in the face of neoliberal individualism. Our children keep begging for us to connect in so many ways. If neoliberalism at its core is disconnection, competition, and individualism, then motherhood is radical in the sense that it constantly urges us to connect, share, and love. Our children—who constantly remind us to slow down, to love, and share with them—are truly our protectors from the viral load of neoliberalism. If we follow their lead, perhaps we can let the things that do not serve us as humans crumble away so that we can rebuild a better world after COVID-19.

In the meantime, we are plagued with the question of how to live through this time in ways that protect us and our families. We must juggle increased workloads and domestic labour. As mothers, we also desperately need breaks and rest. We need spaces that provide freedom, creativity, relaxation, and respite. Many of us have been pouring from empty cups these past several months and are in desperate search of vitality. As a graduate student and mother, there are loud demands from work and from family, both of which are important. Yet there are quieter demands from myself asking me to rest a bit more and to not lose myself. It is so hard to rest when so much is at stake and so much is unknown; there are budget cuts coming, there is children's homework to help with, there are meals to prepare, there is a dissertation to

write, and the living room needs to be vacuumed. How can I answer that voice in me, which is begging for a space of my own—outside of work and family obligations—when that voice is so quiet and the others are so loud?

I keep returning to this theme of movement—this urging inside to move my energy and my body. If I remain stagnant, neoliberalism will gobble me right up, like a virus consumes its host. If everything is changing around us, then perhaps staying still is the most detrimental thing to do right now. I find that essential movement in bellydance. Perhaps this sounds silly to a nondancer, but the American bellydance tradition is incredibly representative of female empowerment, community, art, possibility, creativity, and new beginnings. Connecting with myself on a somatic level and connecting with others through online bellydance classes have offered a sacred space from which new possibilities can emerge. For me, it is also a necessary practice for moving through this time unscathed by neoliberal expectations in academia and motherhood. As we are home more and our work and nonmarket spaces are mixing, protecting practices and spaces from neoliberal cooption is essential. Honouring and recognizing the need to quarantine these spaces from neoliberalism, whatever they may be, are essential to the wellbeing and health of mothers as well.

So, it is autumn now. The days are getting shorter. The sun is setting earlier. A chill is in the air. But I am not sure if the chill is coming from the weather change or the political situation in which we find ourselves. Is the chill a reminder that we must prepare for a beautiful winter or is it warning us to take shelter again? What I do know is that the pandemic continues, the media continues, the distance learning continues, and the political divisions continues. Housework continues. Racism continues. Neoliberalism continues. But the seasons are changing. Nothing can go on forever. The leaves are falling from the trees now. My children are outgrowing their clothes once again. The shedding of old ways is happening. As mothers, we are used to moving through big changes, and we may at least find solace in the fact that our love for our children remains and continues. Our creative power continues. Our wisdom continues. Our strength continues. New possibilities continue. Our resistance to any viral threat that seeks to disconnect us from our children and from who we are continues. Our immunity strengthens and so does our love.

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SUSAN E. MANNON

## The New Normal? Work, Family, and Higher Education under COVID-19

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*Accounts of the social and economic changes brought on by COVID-19 describe these changes as the “new normal.” I argue that these changes are actually an extension of existing trends. For five decades, neoliberal reforms have resulted in the privatization and corporatization of everyday life, reshaping social institutions in the process. Of these institutions, the contemporary university is particularly important because it is both a workplace and a training ground in which neoliberal norms around competition, achievement, and individualism are enforced and promoted. This situation has socialized a new class of professionals to be productive workers who expect very little from their government, which is particularly problematic for women attempting to balance work and family life. To explore what this means under pandemic conditions, I draw on the life of Angelica, a woman who traded a life of drug addiction and welfare dependency for college attainment and professional work. College should have liberated her; instead, it has left her with a demanding job and little to no institutional help. I compare what is expected of Angelica as a college-educated working mother under the pandemic and what was expected of me as a professor and mother before the pandemic, suggesting important continuities in the pace of work, the nature of care, and the expectations of the self and others.*

### A Reintroduction

When the pandemic hit, Stockton, California, was still reinventing itself. The 2008 global recession had left the city decimated; entire neighborhoods emptied of families as bank-owned houses lay vacant. Of course, the City of Stockton did not have too far to fall. It had long been home to low-income racial-ethnic “others” who laboured on Central Valley farmland or in the San

Francisco Bay area. In the 1990s, the city became “majority minority,” with whites fleeing to exurbs as Stockton’s complexion grew darker (Mannon, “Faces of Stockton” 68). But the recession left Stockton particularly bruised, with Forbes magazine crowning it America’s Most Miserable City in 2011. In the years that followed, it looked like the city might turn the corner on this crisis. A young Black mayor with roots in the city and a Stanford education was elected on a promise to transform the city. He attracted national attention for initiatives around implementing a universal basic income, reducing gun violence, and facilitating college attendance.

In the heady days of this urban reinvention, I came to see Stockton as something of a natural laboratory. Not only did the city have its fair share of problems, but it had within its borders at least one potential solution: a four-year university degree program that offered a potential pathway out of poverty. University of the Pacific was the first private university in the Central Valley and today ranks among the state’s most reputable private universities. Its ivory tower peeks up from a canopy of trees as if to beckon students from the bowels of the city with its promise of high-earning jobs and improved life chances. But was college really a panacea? To study this question, I began following one Stocktonian as she navigated college and attempted to translate her degree into a good job, a woman I call Angelica. Angelica and I had met when we both started at Pacific—she a first-year transfer student and me a new tenure-track professor. Neither of us was typical. Angelica was a single mother on welfare. I was a once tenured professor who had fallen in academic rank after having a baby. For both of us, Pacific was a second chance and our best shot at securing solid middle-class footing. If Pacific was going to offer anything to Stockton, I reasoned, I had to see first if it offered anything to us.

In 2018, I published an analysis of Angelica’s path through Pacific (Mannon, “Misery”). As I suggested then, there was never any guarantee that Angelica would make it to graduation. When she started at Pacific, she was pregnant with her third child and had just been abandoned by her partner. The university neither cared about these challenges nor accommodated them. And the state was not much better. She had to fight with case workers to even attend college. Despite these odds, she finished her degree and found a job, though not a high paying one, as a resident services coordinator at a low-income housing complex. She had also settled into married life, though it, too, had its downsides, since her husband was a long-term inmate in a California prison. Her welfare benefits expired and still no partner with whom to share expenses, Angelica struggled to raise children and her standard of living even with a college degree. I concluded that what college offered people like Angelica was complicated, even more so when I considered what the academy offered me. Because while Angelica struggled to get through college and get something out of it, I was struggling to find within the academy any semblance of financial

security and work-family balance. Even after earning a doctorate, I had spent half my career working as an adjunct professor, barely earning enough to pay for childcare.

By the time the pandemic hit, then, Angelica and I were much like the City of Stockton—testaments to American reinvention but also American precarity. As COVID-19 cases began to mount, schools closed their doors, the economy grounded to a halt, and all of us found ourselves in a familiar place: just struggling to get by. Thus, it was curious to hear talk about a “new normal.” Commentators lamented the burden now faced by parents, as their work life deteriorated or simply disappeared, their obligations to work and family competing as they sheltered in place. The government, which was barely attempting to contain the novel virus, had little help to offer. But was this really a new normal or just the old normal to which we were growing accustomed and perhaps even numb? As I continued to follow Angelica’s life and reflect on my own, I stopped asking whether Angelica was transformed by college because it was clear by then that she had been. Instead, I began asking what she was transformed into. Because I suspect that what Pacific gave her, and what Pacific gave me, was not so much the rewards of a middle-class life but the idea that work and not help would save us. In this sense, COVID-19 was no rupture, no turning point, and no new normal. It was the realization and unveiling of what we had been reduced to all along. The facade gone, we could see what an American city, a tenured professor, and a welfare mother turned college graduate had become: competitors in a high-stakes game that all of us were scared to lose.

### **Zooming in on a Life**

In the San Francisco Bay Area, most people cannot afford to live where they work. Instead, they buy or rent homes along a corridor of dusty towns stretching north to south along California’s Central Valley. Stockton sits on this corridor and is connected by highway to both the state capital of Sacramento and San Francisco. This highway system and the commuter pattern it supported would be the same conduit for COVID-19 to spread rapidly throughout the region. By the time the pandemic is in full swing, however, all but the most essential of the area’s workers are shuttered in their homes. So, Angelica and I communicate mostly by phone or through Zoom. This is how she ends up giving me a video tour of her new home one day. “Here’s Lola’s room,” she explains, panning the camera to reveal the lavender-painted room of her twelve-year-old daughter. Moisés, her son, jumps in and out of view, grinning widely, as he holds up an angry-looking, long-haired cat.

Angelica exits through a door to reveal a sprawling backyard, where her brother stands over an electric saw, a pencil tucked neatly behind his ears.

Earlier, she had complained about him: “He bitches about how I’m not raising Moisés right and disciplines him. But when it’s time to help Moisés with school—get him online—my brother’s asleep in his room!” Now, her brother glances at her, turning back to the saw without speaking. Angelica walks around the yard’s perimeter, the lawn littered with furniture and boxes. “We’ve got cockroaches. So, we had to put everything out here to clean and spray the house,” she explains. The cockroaches have been an ongoing issue, and their things have been out on the lawn for some time. Angelica shows off a makeshift greenhouse, where she is growing succulents to sell on the side; she then returns to the house to settle into the couch, one of the few remaining pieces of furniture in the living room.

“How are you feeling these days?” I ask. Angelica is still recuperating from COVID-19, which she caught at work. It somehow seemed fitting that Angelica, who was always coping with crises, would turn up positive, especially since she had many of the risk factors associated with the disease: a job as an essential worker, membership in a multigenerational household, and residence in one of the hardest hit areas in the country. “My family was furious with me,” she remembers. “It took eight days for the results to come back, and we had my grandma and all my aunts and uncles over. I kissed my grandma on the cheek and everything.” But no one else’s test results came back positive, and their anger soon turned to suspicion. “They started talking shit like, ‘You didn’t really have it. It was a false positive,’” she recounts. “I was in bed for like a week. It really hurt that they didn’t even think I had it, especially ‘cause I was the one working to support everyone.”

Angelica had always been something of a black sheep in her family. In her late teens and early twenties, she had been a drug addict, a high school dropout, and a single mother. As such, they questioned and scrutinized everything she did—from going to college, to having another baby, to getting married. Everything seemed unreasonable and reckless to them. Why get a bachelor’s degree when what she needed was a job? Why have a third baby when she was single and already had two children? Why get married when the man she was marrying was Black, Muslim, and in prison? In the eyes of her family, Angelica was a train wreck, even after she got sober, earned her GED, and won a scholarship to attend college. In the eyes of society, Angelica looked even worse. She was a woman of colour, a once undocumented immigrant, and a former welfare dependent. Her addiction to drugs had cost her custody of her first born and would have cost her custody of her second born had she not entered rehab and gotten clean. In these respects, she bore the markers of feminized poverty, urban decay, and social disorder. Thus, she and I were constantly rewriting her narrative to cast her as something more than the bad mother and social deviant that everyone saw her as. “I’m sorry they didn’t believe you,” I say, always struggling to find the right words to comfort her.

“You deserve better.” And she does.

### **The Business of Higher Education**

Along Angelica’s path to redemption, college attainment played a pivotal role. It signalled conformity and legitimacy, and it marked a before and an after in her life history. Yet just as higher education was orchestrating a transformation of Angelica, it was experiencing a transformation of its own. Scholars disagree on exactly when this transformation began, but they agree that it involved a shift in a more businesslike direction. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades use the term “academic capitalism” to describe the shift. Others have described it as “knowledge capitalism” (Olssen and Peters) and the “corporate university” (Tuchman). Whatever the case, and whatever the term, the new model entails a detour from the university’s earlier purpose of promoting engaged citizenship and public knowledge. In place of or alongside these lofty goals, the modern university is now in the business of making money. The 1970s fiscal crisis of the state, which reduced public spending for universities, cemented this corporate direction.

Higher education’s newfound business mindedness coincided globally with a move towards smaller governments and freer markets. So-called neoliberal for its resuscitation of classic economic principles, this new market orientation came to pervade almost all aspects of life. Cash-strapped governments began outsourcing everything from garbage collection to mass imprisonment while time-starved families purchased cleaning services and family dinner from the market. To what extent has the market intruded into academia? Scholars have had no shortage of answers, in part because their work and intellectual life have been so negatively implicated (Aronowitz; Connell; Giroux; Olssen; Park; Saunders). They have highlighted the commodification of both knowledge and education in the form of grants and patents, student fees, and tuition dollars. They have also pointed to the privatization of higher education, evidenced by the reduction in state spending and the dramatic rise in for-profit colleges. Finally, they have lamented the corporatization of the academy, with university leaders morphing into managers and CEOs, faculty into service providers and sales representatives, and students into customers looking for a return on their investment (Slaughter and Rhoades).

These neoliberal trends have resulted in competitive pressures at every level of the university system. Universities compete for students and grants; departments and programs jockey for resources and majors; faculty vie for tenure-track lines and publications; and students battle for spots at elite and even middle-tier schools. Some win; others lose. And in this regard, the statistics are telling. A 2015 Moody’s Investor Service report predicted that the number of American colleges forced to close would likely triple in the

coming decade due to inadequate revenue. A 2018 analysis by the American Association of University Professors showed that over 70 per cent of faculty positions in the United States (U.S.) are now off the tenure track. And 2016 data showed that the average student loan debt in the U.S. stood at a whopping \$32,731 (Board of Directors). The irony, of course, is that the corporate university blossomed at precisely the same moment when higher education became so central to achieving social mobility (Attewell and Lavin; Hout).

How does this context help us understand the university under pandemic conditions? In March of 2020, when almost every U.S. college and university transitioned to remote instruction, university life retreated into the household. The online classroom became academia's frontline and faculty its essential workers. Instructors had to learn new online teaching modalities, develop new lines of communication, survey and connect students to technology and academic support, and, of course, do everything they did before the pandemic: teach students, advise majors, conduct research, and provide service. For those who had caregiving responsibilities, the situation was particularly dire. Because alongside their own classes, faculty had to assist their own bewildered children as they transitioned to online learning. Households became computer labs that challenged even the most well connected and technologically savvy.

At first glance, it seems that life had been turned upside down as a result of COVID-19. But as we consider the transformation overtaking academia over the past fifty years, it all seems oddly familiar. The university system had long attempted to externalize costs. Online course platforms, laptop computers, and email brought work home and into the weekend. For adjunct instructors, who are almost never provided office space, homes and even cars were already places of work. And due both to the imperative that faculty publish or perish and the underpaid nature of most faculty appointments, work life took on a frenetic pace as faculty tried to cram ever more into the work week. This intensification of work life has not been limited to academia. It has been a characteristic feature of almost every professional workplace setting in recent years. What makes higher education unique is that it is not only a workplace but a training ground. Here is not only where we work to stay on top but where we teach others to do the same. In my earlier analysis of Angelica's life, I argued that to best understand what college offered a woman like her, we had to examine what comes after college. Holding up my own life as an example, I suggested that although college offers employability, it does not necessarily offer quality of life or middle-class security. Now, I argue that the best way to understand what the coronavirus means to women like Angelica and what it means to me, we have to understand what came before the pandemic hit as much as what came after. Because what looks like a new normal is arguably the old normal, just a bit more intense.

## Encountering the New Normal

In the last week of February, mere weeks before northern California would be forced into a lockdown, Angelica was promoted to the position of resident services manager, overseeing both her own and six other properties. In retrospect, the timing was fortuitous because within two months, Angelica would be financially supporting her entire household. Her position was considered essential. And from the sound of it, it was nothing but. A mobile food bank came to the property once a month, which it had always done. But under social distancing restrictions, Angelica had to individually bag food for the ninety-two units in her complex and take them to each apartment. Using massive spreadsheets, she also had to determine the myriad needs of her residents, everything from unemployment and food stamps to Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots. About half the residents in her complex lost their jobs. And since most did not know how to navigate the social welfare system, she had to do the paperwork for them. California's Employment Development Department, which processes unemployment claims, quickly became overwhelmed at the start of the pandemic. So, it was not merely a question of filling out an application: "We would go in first thing in the morning and call [to check on their applications] and couldn't even get through. And then it was a matter of figuring out the right things to say.... Like you had to be a fucking accountant." In April, an anonymous donor gave the nonprofit for whom Angelica worked two million dollars to help defray the costs of rent for people affected by the pandemic. The donation created a whole new layer of administrative tasks for Angelica: "It became a mess tracking it ... keeping up with who signed it and then looking at check stubs to find the dates and the amounts, the net and the gross.... It became so time consuming because if you can imagine forty-six applications. And every month there was a different round." Angelica was working sixty-hour weeks for months: "It was one of those things where you just go, go, go, because if you stop, you fall apart."

By this point, Angelica's three children had moved to remote instruction. With a daughter in high school, another in junior high and another in kindergarten, Angelica could barely keep up. Due to the pandemic, her mother had been forced to shut down the bar she owned and was available to supervise Angelica's children. But she did not prove to be much help:

She would be like, "Is Lola supposed to be on the computer because she's in bed." And I'm like, "Yeah, mom, she's supposed to [be on the computer]!" [Lola's] teachers kept emailing me "Lola's not doing her work." And so finally, at some point, I [said to the teachers]: "I don't know what your expectations are. But I am not able to help her. And my mom doesn't know how to help her. And her sister is helping herself."

Angelica's residents and her children were not the only ones in need of help. Her mother had a small business and had applied for a loan offered by the Small Business Administration. The Payment Protection Program was designed to help small businesses keep their business and their employees afloat. But almost no small, locally run businesses managed to get the loan. Angelica learned from her supervisor's wife that businesses had to apply for the loan through smaller banks. So, with Angelica's help, her mom applied a second time and managed to secure a loan. But the process was hardly easy:

[My mom's] personal and business finances were all meshed. So, I had to figure [out] how much money she spent on goods, how much her revenue was, how much she paid employees, how much she paid in payroll taxes.... I was researching when I was home or on the weekends ... and then during the week just working so I never, ever had time for the kids. You know, and they were just falling further and further behind. With Angelica's help, her mom was also able to get unemployment. But at two hundred dollars a week, it barely covered food and gas.

And then there was Angelica's husband, Talib. Talib and Angelica had met when she was working at a state prison. Her developing relationship with him had been grounds for her dismissal. As he was transferred to different prisons throughout the state, she faithfully called and visited. After some years, they married in a Muslim ceremony closely supervised by prison staff. They had been working for over a year with a lawyer to see if Talib qualified for early release under the prison reforms adopted by the state. In the meantime, she had to advocate for him constantly. For example, during the pandemic, Talib was relegated to his cell where, through an illicit trade in cell phones, he was able to talk to Angelica nightly. When the guards discovered the phone, they confiscated his Koran as punishment. Talib was furious and called Angelica:

"I need you to advocate for me and write emails and letters" [he said].... So, I called everybody that I could in the prison system—wardens and the ombudsman and the special investigations units. Three weeks after I started making phone calls, he got [his Koran] back.... It's like you basically have to be a lawyer because I had to cite this penal code [and show] that they cannot take away his religious things. Tellingly, Angelica described her phone calls with Talib as work, since he needed so much emotional support and institutional help.

Along with being a breadwinner for her family, a social worker for her residents, a teacher for her children, an accountant for her mother, and a lawyer for her husband, Angelica was a therapist for the people for whom she sympathized deeply:

A lot of times, I'd come home crying, you know, just like the emotional labour of dealing with everybody's situation.... People getting COVID and being scared and not being able to go out and get essentials.... Or a [seventy-year-old] grandma [who's] raising grandkids, and she has cancer, and, you know, parents are drug addicts running the streets, and she's stuck with a five- and six-year-old to raise.... Families that have eight or nine people and waiting for months on end for their unemployment to come. And a lot of people didn't have anybody to talk to. So, I became a counsellor, a therapist.

In short, Angelica was everything to everyone. But what is striking about her story is not how much she worked and cared for everyone but how little everyone worked and cared for her. Even when Angelica tested positive for the coronavirus, her family responded with a mixture of anger and suspicion. Angelica was in what she has described as a “hopeless place”; her only sanctuary were the moments she stole, parked in her car, before going to face another day of work.

### **Revisiting the Old Normal**

Although life during the pandemic felt overwhelming for Angelica, it was not the first time she had struggled. And it likely would not be the last. Often, COVID-19 felt the same for me a—mere footnote in a life of tumult and frenzy. Unlike Angelica, my early years afforded middle-class privilege. I was native born, the child of white parents born and raised in the country's midwestern heartland. My father was a college professor, and although he and my mother divorced and my mother moved my sister and me, I had as orderly a home as a single, working mother could provide. My mother went on to have a successful career, demonstrating ambition in abundance, as she worked late each night over coffee and cigarettes. By the time I left home for college, I knew how to make good grades, how to write, and how to win. I quickly set my sights on graduate school, securing a scholarship to one of the top ranked doctoral programs in the country. My first job was at a Research I university, and I was under no illusions about what it would take to get tenure there. Immediately, I set to work launching research projects and publishing journal articles. Just as in graduate school, I worked fifty-hour weeks and did not date. So, it was out of character when, on a drunken night, I created a profile on Match.com. That's how I met Brett, who lived in a neighbouring state. Within three years, I would be married and pregnant.

I had not planned to get pregnant with Annie. Although I certainly wanted children, I had no idea how to make room for them in my life. I knew nothing about the family leave policy at my university, which was not surprising because it turned out that there was no policy. Brett and I continued to live in

two different states, each with household expenses of our own. Taking unpaid leave through the Family and Medical Leave Act was, therefore, out of the question. In any event, my department chair discouraged me from taking the leave, counselling me to simply take a couple weeks off to have the baby. Having never had a baby, this sounded reasonable. Annie arrived on February 17, and I lined up my parents to come and take turns caring for her. This was before their eyesight and patience deteriorated to the point where they could manage only periodic visits. I needed their help more than ever because not only did I have a newborn, I had just a few months before going up for tenure. Brett dropped in when he could, but he was busy interviewing for jobs in locations that could accommodate both our careers. And this is how we became a tired but troublesome statistic. Brett secured a higher paid position in California and I, following my tenure announcement, resigned to follow him. In an instant, his salary increased by \$15,000. Mine disappeared.

Cognizant that a gap in my employment record would ruin my chances of working at a university again, I took any adjunct appointment I could find, most of them online and out of state. Over the years that followed, I pieced together a contingent work life, teaching six courses a semester at four different universities. I had no health insurance, no retirement benefits, and, again, no family leave when my second daughter was born. In a good year, I earned \$45,000 year before taxes. After taxes, childcare expenses, and tucking some money away for retirement, I barely earned enough to pay my share of the mortgage. And it certainly did not feel like I was living a middle-class life. We eked by with a weekly food budget of \$125, picking up half our groceries at the Dollar Tree.

After five years as an adjunct, the unthinkable happened: a tenure-track position came open in my field at University of the Pacific. In addition to teaching courses and raising children, I had continued to publish, which helped me land a job at the rank of associate professor with two years to secure tenure. It was arguably harder to earn tenure the second time, especially after Belle, my two-year old, ended up in the hospital and diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. I struggled to make room for six insulin injections a day, training the staff at her daycare to care for her and track her blood sugar. Eventually, I did earn tenure. But by then, I had bigger problems. Although Brett and I had always planned for three children, I was now over forty and had already endured two miscarriages. After Belle's birth and diagnosis, I would endure four more. It felt as if I had been walking up hill for years to achieve what had come so easily to my own parents. I had done the hard work, played the game well, and made the right investments. And yet here I was, panting like a marathon runner with three more miles to go. When Annie, my eldest daughter, was also diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, I felt defeated. With no after school program willing or legally required to accommodate her disease,

Brett and I hired a nanny for \$20 an hour, which pushed our monthly childcare expenses to over \$1300 a month. Around the same time, the university announced its first of many salary freezes. After sixteen years of working as a college professor, my salary had risen a mere \$5,000. But I was lucky. Brett and I had health insurance, which was no small matter since our daughters' disease cost well over \$2000 a month to manage.

Having struggled and failed to bring a pregnancy to term, my husband and I decided to pursue in vitro fertilization using a donor embryo at a cost of \$21,000. After taking out a second mortgage, and already being in horrendous debt, the cost seemed manageable. I gave birth to Izzy at the age of forty-five, exactly four months after becoming department chair and learning that we could not afford for me to take maternity leave. For three weeks following Izzy's birth, I strapped him to my chest and taught my courses until the semester ended. Summer offered a respite, and I was thankful because when the fall semester started, I was scrambling for daycare. Izzy had been waitlisted at the one childcare centre in town. As we desperately waited for a spot to open, I pieced together babysitters so that I could teach and run the department. In between meetings and classes, I shuffled Izzy between babysitters, rushing into my classes drenched in sweat and leaking milk. My students were never afraid to ask for accommodation for a litany of learning disabilities I had never heard of, but they were not inclined to extend much compassion towards me. They skewered me in their evaluations of my teaching. So, it was with great celebration when, in January of 2020, a spot opened up at the daycare. Izzy started full time the final week of January. Six weeks later, the pandemic hit.

### **The Problem of Higher Education**

What can we learn from the histories and experiences of two very different women whose lives once intersected in the university? Do they tell us something about work and family life in the time of COVID-19 or reveal something about the function, or dysfunction, of the modern university? The differences between Angelica's work-family experiences after the pandemic hit and my experiences before are both numerous and significant. But considering these stories together is suggestive. As COVID-19 cases raged across California, Angelica worked tirelessly and inched ever closer to burnout as she alone cared for over a hundred people. This is no surprise; it is what we would expect. What may come as a surprise is that a woman with plenty more racial and class privileges, more education than 98 per cent of the country, and a partner with whom to share expenses and responsibilities would find herself in a similar state long before the pandemic even hit. If I was barely holding on before the coronavirus, why should we expect a Mexican immigrant woman who is raising three children in America's "most miserable city" to be anything

but hopeless in the middle of this pandemic? I was the best case in the old normal, and she the worst case in the new normal. And our lives were equally frenzied, disempowering, and, above all, exhausting.

One could simply argue that Angelica's life and my own look similar because we are working mothers. But is there another variable at work here? For years, I have reflected on the role that higher education plays in the new economy, theorizing that it both reflects neoliberalism in its emerging corporate structure and facilitates neoliberalism in its training of a professional workforce. In my earlier analysis of Angelica's life, I suggested that Angelica gained meaning from college not simply because it gave her a credential to navigate a competitive labour market but because it placed her symbolically on the right side of society once she graduated. It wiped clean the smudge of her undocumented status, drug addiction, single motherhood, and welfare dependency. But Angelica was not simply recast as a respectable member of society; she was transformed by higher education. College inculcated in her all the hallmarks of neoliberalism: personal responsibility, individual achievement, work productivity, and competitive drive. In short, it instilled in her the self-discipline necessary to compete in the market. Angela Duckworth would call this "grit;" I would call it self-torture. In the hidden curriculum of the neoliberal university, we learn to internalize the notion that to ask for help or depend on others is to be a loser. And when we fail, which we inevitably do, we learn to blame ourselves. College does not teach us to question or seek truth. It teaches us to be individuals. It teaches us to compete. And it teaches us to win, or at least to fear losing.

Thus, when COVID-19 hit, we had already been broken in. We knew how to work late, denying our bodies rest and nourishment. We were accustomed to America's inadequate human service infrastructure, which gave help begrudgingly and in miniscule portion. And here is where neoliberalism takes on its intensely gendered character because the submission to the market that neoliberalism demands of workers echoes the historic submission expected of women. The two forms of servitude are, in fact, related since women's unpaid care work has always undergirded capitalism. The coronavirus pandemic entailed almost a complete privatization of everyday life, most notably in the abdication by the state to care for the sick or educate the country's children in any meaningful way. Suddenly, we glimpsed what a truly neoliberal world would look like. With no state to offer school reopening plans, a reliable COVID-19 test, or even toilet paper when stores ran out, we found whatever market alternatives we could, neglecting our wellbeing and our children's wellbeing when we could not.

Without question, Angelica and I were better off on account of our university education when compared to the residents in her housing complex. To begin, we both have remained employed throughout the pandemic. But one of the

most troubling transformations that takes place under neoliberalism is that we begin to feel lucky for even the tiniest bit of fortune. Instead of asking why one of the richest countries in the world cannot ensure that everyone's basic needs are met, we keep our mouths shut, lest we look ungrateful that we have so much while others do not. In the end, Angelica and I are competitors in a race we never designed. And though we are winning, we are clearly out of breath.

### **Stepping Back from a Life**

When the pandemic hits, Izzy's daycare remains open. It is one of the few businesses that does. But on a hot day in September, Izzy has been banned from the centre due to a fever of 101. It turns out not to be COVID-19, but a case of hand-foot-and-mouth disease. He stumbles around the house in a loose-fitting onesie, with his growing blond hair dishevelled and his mouth covered in angry red blisters. Although he regularly naps a full three hours at daycare, he has never slept more than thirty minutes at home. So, by 1:00 p.m., he is wide awake but cranky. When I begin class on Zoom, he crumples to the floor by my chair crying loudly. One advantage to a virtual classroom is that students cannot see anything beyond the camera, and I gather him on my lap and pull out a tired breast to put in his mouth.

When California had gone on lockdown, and our household had begun working from home, we all set up workspaces in the house, staking out claims like greedy miners. I had claimed the dining room table, settling into the main room of the house, an open-concept dining, living, and kitchen area. It proves a disastrous choice, since my concentration evaporates the minute anyone goes into the kitchen for food or the living room for respite. "Mom, how long should I microwave the popcorn?" "Mom, wanna see what I made on Minecraft?" "Mom, what's nine plus three?" Regularly, I scream at my children to shut up, often forgetting to mute myself when I am in a meeting over Zoom. But a bigger problem than my concentration is my time, or lack thereof. My work and family life have not just collapsed into each other; my responsibilities to both have suddenly increased. Belle is in third grade and struggles with math. Annie is in seventh and disappears during class regularly to play outdoors. In between classes, I alternate between tutoring Belle and searching for Annie. But, like Angelica, most of the time, I am buried in my paid work, which piles up on my makeshift desk in an unstable stack.

That my paid work tasks should pile up is not surprising. As the chair of my department, I have to supervise faculty as they learn new online learning platforms; hunt down students who, like Annie, vanish regularly in remote instruction; and counsel everyone for whom this mode of learning proves overwhelming. I must devise strategies to attract and retain students, as the university frets over a precipitous decline in enrollment. My life becomes a

blur of virtual open houses, Zoom-based advising sessions, and Facebook Live events. In the middle of this frenzy, Pacific made two important announcements that affect me daily. First, in the interests of financial solvency, the university added one class to everyone's teaching load. Second, they stopped contributions to our retirement. Both had been proposals the administration had been pushing for years. And dumbstruck faculty voice their suspicions via lengthy email exchanges that this is a classic case of "shock doctrine," wherein neoliberal institutions exploit crises to push through policies that people are too distracted to resist (Klein).

The university's decision to increase our workload and reduce our pay while I am redesigning my classes and homeschooling my children weighs on me as I wrap up a lecture and dislodge Izzy from my breast. But I hardly have time to dwell. It is time to collect Belle from FunCamp. That's what they call it anyway. FunCamp is a gymnastics centre in town that has repackaged itself as a "virtual learning support center" at a cost of \$125 a week. Amid balance beams and floor mats, a group of fourteen elementary school students gather each day to learn from a distance behind three-sided cardboard panels. It looks like a cross between a gymnastics meet and a science fair. But it provides a space to move at least one of my children off site for the school day. As I strap Izzy into his car seat, I run through a mental to do list: pick up Belle, get gas, go to the pharmacy, make dinner, put Izzy to bed, and grade papers. A week earlier, I had run out of my antidepressants before I was allowed a refill. This was no surprise, since I had been doubling up for weeks to quell my growing anxiety. I had resorted to pilfering the pills from Annie, who had recently been placed on the same drug. Now, we are both out of pills, and it is finally time for a refill.

When I pull into the Kaiser parking lot, Izzy and Belle in tow, I realize that I have no way to get in the door. Izzy is still running a fever and will not make it past the temperature check. I park under a tree in a spot close to the door. "I'll be quick," I say to Belle. "If your brother cries, jump in the backseat and talk to him." I run into Kaiser, sighing with relief when I see no line. I am in and out within minutes. But as I make my way through the automatic doors, the heat of late summer enveloping me, my heart sinks. There, standing by Belle's window is a security guard on the phone. I run to the car stammering, "I'm her mom. She's ok. I just went in for a second to pick up my prescription." "Ma'am, I'm going to have to call the police. You're not allowed to leave children alone in the car," the guard declares. "I know I can't leave them in the car. But... But what was I supposed to do? The baby has a fever and I don't have anyone to watch him," I explain, my voice dripping with desperation. "Yes, this is Marta Gonzalez with Kaiser security, I'm calling to report two children left alone in a car," she says into the phone. I unlock the car to find Belle in the passenger's seat crying. "It's ok," I say as I put the key in the

ignition and back up with haste. “They’re gonna arrest you,” she shrieks. “They’re not gonna fucking touch me,” I say, my voice shaking as I speed out of the parking lot.

As we get on the highway, Belle’s tears begin to subside. “I was just so scared, and she kept asking me what your name was. And I didn’t say anything ‘cause I was scared you’d go to jail,” she says between gentle hiccups. “I’m so sorry I put you in that situation, Belle. But we’re ok. Let me take you to McDonald’s, ok? Let me get you some Chicken McNuggets,” I ramble. This cheers her up immediately, and within minutes, we are in the drive-thru ordering a four-piece chicken nugget. At the window, I grab my phone case to retrieve my debit card, realizing then that I only brought my insurance card. I don’t even have my driver’s license. “Belle, look in the glove compartment for change,” I command. Inside, she finds two one-dollar bills. A miracle. “See? Our day is turning around,” I say with a smile. The drive-thru window flings open, and a young man with a headset pokes his head out. “\$3.96 please.” “\$3.96?” I ask incredulously. “For four chicken nuggets?” Tears well up in my eyes. “I’m sorry,” I stammer. “I don’t have enough money.” “It’s ok,” he says kindly. “You can just pull through,” which gives me the impression that this has happened before. But the tears and the shame come anyway. And once I start crying, I cannot stop. A dam has broken inside me and all the pain, shame, and fatigue from twenty-eight years of university work, twelve years of mothering, and six months of pandemic hell come out in deep, heaving sobs that shake the car. They say it takes a village to raise a child. But I am alone, save for an infant sleeping behind me and an eight-year-old girl now stroking my arm. “It’s ok, mommy. Sometimes we just need a good cry.”

### **Another Conclusion**

First, they dismantled welfare, imposing time limits and work requirements on poor single mothers. Then, they chipped away at funding for public schools, piling up children in classrooms and raising tuition by the thousands. Now, they are after social security, imagining new ways to run dry the shallow well of our social safety net. These efforts, begun long before COVID-19, were neither random nor disconnected. They were part of a trend, perhaps a plan to privatize and marketize each aspect of our lives. COVID-19 furthered these trends and carried them to fruition. There was no conspiracy, no committee unleashing the virus in order to move forwards a neoliberal agenda. There was only an opportunity to enact a grand dress rehearsal of what a world without social support would look like. Thus, there was no political miscalculation in President Donald Trump’s reaction to the pandemic. He reacted to the virus in the way a good neoliberal president should—by leaving individuals, families, and communities to figure it out on their own.

I once argued that there was no special magic that happened in college, no metamorphosis that made you stable and sane, which was why my life looked remarkably similar to Angelica's when we first met. I was wrong. College did transform Angelica; it just did not liberate her. It took a woman once addicted to drugs—half-heartedly raising her children and dependent on the state—and like the welfare system itself, it made her into an upstanding neoliberal citizen. Instead of being disciplined by the state, she learned to discipline herself, adapting to the rigours of near constant work and raising her children without help from the state or even their father. The corporate culture of college indoctrinated her into this habitus. For this, she was considered a winner, even though she arguably lost so much. As her former college professor and mentor, I was instrumental in this process, since I helped groom Angelica, just like my mother groomed me. As Angelica told me, "I've never been this responsible for so many people in my life. This is Angelica on a whole new level." She continued:

Initially, it felt really good that I was able to provide ... all the services to my residents. And that I was able to get my mom the loan and her unemployment going. You know, that I had the knowledge and the skills [to do that]. But then it kind of slipped into a burden. Like I'm holding up all of this and I can't fall apart because if I fall apart, it's all going to come tumbling down. Such was life under COVID-19; such was life under neoliberalism. For both, women's labor is crucial.

In her study of women factory workers in modern China, Pun Ngai argues that women's bodies naturally resist industrial time and discipline, even when the women do not consciously protest. Their night terrors, menstrual cycles, and pregnancies disrupt the production line, in a sense rebelling on women's behalf. I am not sure I agree. Women's bodies have shown tremendous capacity to withstand near constant labour, even when they are eight months pregnant or in the throes of a miscarriage. For this reason, Angelica and I, along with the world's labouring women, may be capitalism's most perfect servants, giving of ourselves willingly until there is nothing left. For resistance, you need fire and you need oxygen. Unable to breathe, we have neither, surviving instead off the fuel of antidepressants and coffee. Do we have any embers left in us? Perhaps. But only if we can catch our breath.

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MAIRI MCDERMOTT

## Learning from the Experiences of Mothers of School-Aged Children on Tenure Track during the COVID-19 Global Pandemic

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*How are mothers of school-aged children navigating the tenure track in the global pandemic of COVID-19? In this article, I weave my reflections with the voices of other early career academic mothers of school-aged children to tell our varied stories traversing tenure. To access these stories, I conducted synchronous and asynchronous (email) dialogic interviews with six early career academic mothers of school-aged children from a variety of disciplines, departments, and universities in North America. Although COVID-19 will likely have much longer lasting implications, this article focuses on how participants felt in March 2020 when COVID-19 physical distancing plans were widely implemented. As the interviewees suggest, time was negotiated, reorganized, and felt in different ways among academic mothers of school-aged children. There were innumerable factors shaping the various responses to COVID-19 lifeworld reconfigurations while pursuing tenure, and my hope for this article is twofold—that others are able to feel seen and heard and that universities might begin truly listening to the voices and experiences of nondominant faculty to consider reorienting their tenure cultures to be more inclusive of the diverse lifeworlds their faculty inhabit. Importantly, in their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, universities ought to be reflecting on the cultures and temporalities of tenure to better attend to the decline in numbers of women through the professorial ranks. Particularly in heightened times of uncertainty and intensification of historical gender inequities compelled by the global pandemic of COVID-19, this article introduces some considerations for differently approaching and reconfiguring individualist and competitive tenure processes.*

I became a mother while pursuing my doctorate. When I defended my dissertation, my son was almost six months old, and my daughter was two and a half, and when I started in a tenure-track position, my daughter began kindergarten. My experiences during this first year on the tenure track, while learning how to be a mother of a school-age child, prompted me to reflect on these two socially inscribed roles: mother and scholar (McDermott). Two years later, my son entered kindergarten, and I felt I was catching the rhythms of living in these two worlds simultaneously and began embracing the identity of mother-scholar. Then, COVID-19 changed the world. When I heard that K-12 schools in my province were cancelling in-person classes, my heart sank, my head spun, and I worried. How will my children respond, as they were just forming their relationships with(in) school? How can I continue quality teaching and research while facilitating kindergarten and grade-two schoolwork at home? What does this mean for my children's future school experiences and my pursuit of tenure?

In this article, I weave my reflections with the voices of other early career academic mothers of school-aged children to tell our varied stories navigating the tenure track. To access these stories, I conducted synchronous and asynchronous (email) dialogic interviews with six participants from a variety of disciplines, departments, and universities in Canada and the United States. Initially, I sought participants who were in tenure-track positions; later, I reconsidered and broadened early career to include contractual and postdoctoral appointments.

Although COVID-19 will likely have much longer lasting implications, this article captures a moment in time, focusing on how participants felt in March 2020 when COVID-19 physical distancing plans were widely implemented across North America. Drawing on feminist standpoint theory (Collins; Harding; Hartstock; Smith), motherhood studies (DiQuiznio; O'Brien Hallstein and O'Reilly; O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*; Rich; Ruddick; Walker; Weiss) and gendered workplaces scholarship (Acker; Acker and Armenti; Grumet; Massey), I framed the research through the following question: How are mothers of school-aged children navigating the tenure track in the global pandemic of COVID-19? I have learned and grown so much from listening to the participants' narratives in relation to my own experiences. In this article, I amplify those learnings, and the sense of being seen and heard. In addition, I share some considerations for reconfiguring individualist and competitive tenure processes, particularly during heightened times of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic.

## COVID-19 Reconfigured Lifeworlds, Mothers, and Tenure

Early in the pandemic, institutional communications and social media conversation were rife with urgent pleas to return to the way things were. These desires never sat well with me. Indeed, I wondered how the normatives underlying our relations to each other and the earth may be responsible for the pandemic we are confronting. Rather than a return to normalcy, perhaps (if we can express hope in this situation), the pandemic could provide an opportunity to reconfigure our lifeworlds and to come into alternative social, cultural, political, and environmental relations.

In this portion of the article, I animate the context within which this research resides, including the racial, patriarchal, and capitalist logics underpinning tenure processes as well as broader social relations. Indeed, in the moment of #BlackLivesMatter, I admit concern about speaking to the privileged and exclusionary space of the university, and my place in it as a white, heterosexual, married, middle-class, able-bodied, neurotypical, and cisgendered woman and mother. Yet I do believe it is important and necessary to turn our attention here. As one of the participants, Cynthia,<sup>1</sup> said:

I don't feel I can complain and, you know, just getting it off my chest because, then, I think of my friends, my colleagues, and all women who are in very precarious economic conditions, all the things that also happen with Black Lives Matter and all these social discrepancies. So, I don't feel I have a right to complain and voice it out. Still, it's hard. It is.

It is hard. In this section, then, I specifically address the ways in which women have been positioned within universities while those same universities tout the language of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). I also suggest that the role of universities as social and political sites of knowledge production urgently requires us to do and be better with regard to questions of access and representation, particularly in times of social, economic, and environmental upheaval. I am committed to possibilities for the university to return to, or become, a site for critical social engagement—a space that offers alternative ways of doing, being, and relating in the world. Indeed, I desire a university that takes up an ethical responsibility towards making better worlds.

### *EDI: Why We Need Mothers' Voices*

Universities across Canada have increasingly committed to principles of EDI, which support the “mobilization [of] a full spectrum of ideas, talent and experiences ... essential to creating a higher education and research ecosystem that responds to changing Canadian demographics and global challenges” (Universities Canada, *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion* 4). Yet I find myself

frustrated. These EDI statements feel nonperformative (Ahmed): the statements are held up as evidence that the work of challenging existing structural inequities is taken seriously by the institution. For all the EDI statements and strategies that exist, in 2018, Universities Canada described startling declines of women through professorial ranks. As equity-seeking faculty, women accounted for 48.5 per cent of assistant professors, 45 percent of associate professors, and only 27.6 per cent of full professors (Universities Canada, *Recent Data on Equity*). These numbers amplify the “pyramid problem” (Mason and Goulden) or the “leaky pipeline” (Martin; May), in which more women are entering the professorate; however, their representation decreases as you move through the ranks. Within the decreasing ratios of women in the professorial ranks, the literature also shows particular tensions with women who become mothers early in their tenure pursuit (Casteñeda and Isgro; Evans and Grant; O’Meara; Universities Canada, *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion*). Additionally, initial research on the COVID-19 global pandemic has shown the intensification of long-standing gendered inequities (Alon et al.; Andrews et al.; O’Reilly, “Trying to Function”).

I see these inequities as beyond a simple numerical decrease of women throughout academic ranks. In alignment with Sara Ruddick’s central text on maternal thinking, Jane Roland Martin suggests the following: “More than talent is lost when women go missing in academe. Different viewpoints, interests, and life experiences capable of revitalizing existing fields of knowledge and opening up brand new areas of inquiry disappear” (89). As an institution, the university plays a significant role in shaping how we think about and recognize our social, economic, political, and environmental worlds. Problematically, the historically present hegemonic orientation is masculinist and imperial (Chatterjee and Maira). Furthermore, universities are sites of work—employing thousands—and those who are feeling pushed out of the workforce are predominantly women (Alon et al.; Chemaly; O’Reilly, “Trying to Function”). So, we are confronted with concerns around further declines in women’s participation in the workforce, exaggerating the public-private gendered division of labour, which has broader social implications regarding knowledge production and diversity of thought.

As much as I worry about the nonperformativity of EDI statements, policies, and commitments, I also recognize how the fact that these statements exist gives us something tangible to point towards in demands that universities better address social inequities. In other words, how we may use the master’s tools in efforts to dismantle and reconfigure the master’s house (Lorde)—in this case, the tenure track. So, I ask, why does it matter that women, more specifically, mothers, go missing as we travel up the ranks within the professoriate? The principles of inclusive excellence espoused in EDI work to show how increasing access, representation, and knowledge production at the

faculty level influences the success of more diverse academic staff as well as students (Universities Canada, *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion*). This goes beyond expanding the horizons of knowledge production within universities to “build[ing] an innovative, prosperous and inclusive country and [creating] institutions that are responsive, nimble and able to ensure the next generation [i.e., our children] can navigate a fast-paced changing world” (Universities Canada, *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion* 6).

### ***COVID-19 and Intensified Gender Inequities***

If COVID-19 is amplifying gender inequities, this is in part due the stay-at-home mandates, including the large-scale closures of schools and childcare centers. Women, specifically mothers, who can retain their jobs during this crisis, such as academics, are facing severely limited hours within which to carry out their professional expectations, as children are home and requiring care, entertainment, and education (Alon et al; O’Reilly, “Trying to Function”). Mothers still disproportionately tend to housework and childcare, sometimes called the “third shift” (O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*), and early studies, including this research, indicate that of those working from home, mothers are interrupted more than fathers by responding to childcare needs (Alon et al.; Andrew et al.; Featherstone; Moore), adding a “fourth shift” (O’Reilly, “Trying to Function”). Although the participants interviewed in this research all indicated their spouse’s role in childcare and housework, all six commented that for a variety of reasons, they felt they took on more of the work (see also, Alon et al.; Andrew et al.; O’Reilly, “Trying to Function”).

### ***Gender and the Culture and Temporality of the Tenure Track***

Alice Walker stated during a graduation speech at a women’s college, “Your job, when you leave here—as it was the job of educated women before you—is to change the world. Nothing less or easier than that” (70); I carry that call-to-action with me in this research. I am interested in mapping the experiences and navigational tools mothers of school-aged children use on their way towards tenure. Additionally, however, I want to uncover the limiting problematics and open space for rethinking normative expectations constituting the grinding temporality and masculinist, individualist culture of tenure—I want nothing easier or less than to reconceptualize the tenure world.

The most precarious and, arguably, most intensive time in an early academic’s career—pretenure—overlaps with the time when many families have young children (Casteñeda and Isgro; Martin; McDermott; Shahjanan). Further to these conditions, Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden found that men who have children within five years after completing their doctorate are substantially more likely to achieve tenure than women who have children in the early portion of their academic careers. Furthermore, women with babies are 29 per

cent less likely to enter the tenure track than other women, making them underrepresented within the already dwindling number of women in academe. One site of concern, for this research, includes the ways in which mothers are deemed unreliable academic colleagues (Casteñeda and Isgro; Raddon), and now, with COVID-19, pretenure mothers of school-aged children are feeling additional pressures and stresses as they take on education, entertainment, and fulltime childcare.

As already stated, responses to the COVID-19 global pandemic have amplified concerning trends, which have substantial implications for gender equity (Alon et al.; Andrew et al.; Featherstone; Kitchener; O'Reilly, "Trying to Function"). Relating to the tenure track, the most notable trends include a decrease in the percentage of articles submitted by women, whereas men's rates of submission have increased (Kitchener; Oleschuk); moreover, mothers are spending on average four hours more per day tending to children's needs and housework than fathers in heterosexual relationships (Alon et al.; Andrews et al.).

Grounded in these complexities of the COVID-19 global pandemic, I oriented this research in the following way: I engage knowledge as situated in lived experiences shaped through power relations (feminist standpoint theory) to disrupt the discourses that naturalize motherhood as central to womanhood (motherhood studies) while limiting the role and influence of women in the public sphere (gendered workplaces). Before I share parts of the participants' stories, I briefly unpack the research design, which was guided by these theoretical orientations.

### **Feminist Qualitative Methodology**

Research considering the cultural politics of universities—the ways universities are configured to produce particular ways of knowing and being in the world—is necessary to increase EDI and ensure the policies and strategic plans move towards demonstrated cultural and material shifts (Ahmed; Alexander and Mohanty; Chatterjee and Maira; Mills and Berg; Pereira). For this research, I used qualitative interviews to gather stories of mothers' experiences navigating the tenure track. These stories provide embodied details and context in relation to the quantitative research being conducted to help understand the implications of COVID-19 (Teti, Schatz, and Lievenberg). I maintain hope that these stories of how institutional life is navigated by equity-seeking groups will play a role in moving towards the goals of EDI.

**Methods**

The six participants, who all self-identify as mothers of school-aged children pursuing tenure, work in four universities—two in Western Canada, one in Eastern Canada, and one in the Eastern United States—and hold positions in a variety of disciplines: education, religious studies, community health, marketing and business, kinesiology, the performing arts, as well as English and communications. They had been in their respective positions for six months to five years. Two of the participants are in the process of applying for tenure this year. Because tenure is already rife with much anxiety and uncertainty, I promised each participant that I would protect their identities. In the below table, however, I include the participants' pseudonyms and ages of their children to provide some personal context to the narratives shared later.

**Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms and Ages of Children**

Pseudonym	Children's Ages
Chante	8 6
Stacey	8 5
Annalise	8 5
Lisa	19 12
Cynthia	10
Candace	6 3 2

That three of the interviewees had children of similar ages as mine struck a chord with me. I, too, have children ages six and eight. I wonder how the different ages of our children informs our experiences of navigating the tenure track. When comments around the ages of the participants' children emerged in the interviews, I wondered whether there is something to the early elementary years that requires particular attention. Furthermore, and something that challenged me, one interviewee indicated that the move to online learning had to be managed and supported for her child in university as much as for her twelve-year-old. What assumptions do I bring about what it is like to be a mother of children of different ages? Of course, in these

questions, I am amplifying the situated and necessarily incompleteness of my sense making within this research, and, thus, the questions, experiences, concerns, and topics that come up for others never occurred to me.

The primary method of data collection, after institutional ethics approval, was a dialogic interview. Because of the shifting conditions and time constraints with the stay-home regulations and increased childcare (including education), participants had two options: a synchronous Zoom interview or an asynchronous email interview (Linabary and Hamel). In the interviews, instead of asking each participant the same questions, there were three topics I wanted to address. The questions then flowed from the narratives being shared, which allowed me to capture the different ways in which the participants storied and made sense of their experiences. All participants were invited to share the details of the tenure process at their institution and where they are in that process. Then I wanted to have a sense of their home lives, the number and ages of children, as well as whether there are any other adults in their households. Finally, the heart of the interviews included an invitation to discuss the events of mid-March 2020 when mass school-closures and work-from-home responses were put in place to help slow the spread of COVID-19. In this part, I asked the interviewees to reflect on how their newly configured lifeworlds informed their academic trajectories and tenure plans and how that made them feel.

In my interpretive process, I engaged an iterative approach with the narratives by identifying concepts, narratives, and ideas heuristically while thinking with the research question. For the remainder of this paper, I take up the descriptive and reflective sense making to capture what resonated with or challenged my experiences and expectations.

### **Narrative Resonances from the Data**

Each participant commented at some point on how they appreciated having space for these conversations. Indeed, six months into the school closures, I did not realize how important casual conversations with other parents at school pickups and drop offs, or at the park, were for me in terms of feeling seen and heard. These interviews provided me a sense of community and a way to reconnect with other mothers.

#### ***Finding New Rhythms and Seeking Well-Being***

I write this in the early hours from the kitchen table—before my children awake and need breakfast and attention. We are now over five months into COVID-19. Alberta Education just announced that schools will be open, and once again apprehension and concern surge; I want my children to have the social experiences cultivated in schools, but I worry about the health risks to

them and to society. Compound this with the financial cuts to education put into place by the United Conservative Party (UCP) just before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the work-from-home mandates that shifted the terrains of home-work spaces and access to research and teaching materials. As a pretenure mother-scholar in the field of education, I wonder what futures are being made possible in this time. To ground myself, I return to womanist writer Alice Walker, whose chapter “A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children” speaks to me. I am determined to find a way to get the writing done, and that means writing in the moments of quiet solitude early in the morning. I must adjust my daily rhythms and expectations for sustained blocks of writing time.

I am relieved, and yet saddened, that others, too, made purposeful shifts in the spatiotemporalities of academic work. Each interviewee addressed changes in when, where, and how they engage their work now that schools are closed. Annalise summed up the nonchoice in these decisions: “Just buckle down with the time you got.” Of course, there is a critical history of women writers sharing their experiences writing early in the morning and well into the night while the children slept before COVID-19 restrictions were in place: Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, to name a few.

While the children were at school, Chante previously had time to teach her classes, take a walk, and do some of her administrative and research-related work. Chante had the intention of submitting her application for tenure as well as several projects nearing finish that she earmarked to work on after the teaching term ended. Then schools closed, and her husband had to work outside of the house. Chante’s days suddenly became filled with facilitating teaching for her kindergarten and grade-two children as well as keeping them entertained, all the while physically distancing and continuing to teach her courses. When her husband returned from work, she would nap from 3:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. and would then get up to write at night while the children slept.

Cynthia, in contrast, had a different narrative around time and space. She recently started a tenure-track position at a university in another province. The plan was to fly back to her husband and child once a month. When COVID-19 restrictions were announced, it was spring break in her child’s school district. Mother and daughter intended to spend the week together. This bonding time was cut short as the university where Cynthia works closed the campus, and she and her daughter returned to the province where the daughter and husband were still living. She did not have time to collect all the things she needed when the university announced the closing of the campus. As a result, Cynthia was tasked with continuing to teach her courses without all of her books. Space and time shifted rapidly as Cynthia was in her first six months of a tenure-track appointment. While Cynthia did not express concern about how

this may affect her chances for tenure, she did concede that she was worried about her well-being. I remember feeling like she was so calm and relaxed, taking all this upheaval and change in her life with seeming ease. Then she shared: “Like I really, really push myself too far. Like this summer, I didn’t feel like I had any vacation, which is okay, where I took one week of break, meaning I didn’t work. I just answered a few emails, but we didn’t go anywhere. So really pushing myself too hard.”

Lisa also touched on well-being: “My commute also provided an end time to my workday. Without my commute home, I’m finding it difficult to have a natural end time. I will admit that in the early days of COVID-19, my workdays were becoming far too long. I was starting earlier and ending later and then extending my work on the weekends.” I wonder, when rereading these portions of the interviews from Cynthia and Lisa, how hard it can be to turn the work off when our boundary markers—vacation or commutes—disappear.

Lisa also added: “At first, I was delighted not to commute to campus and thought this additional time would be great.” Interestingly, Annalise and Chante also commented on recovered time now that they were no longer up and down the road doing various drop offs and pickups. Lisa continued: “However, I soon realized that my commute provided me with an opportunity to reflect and listen to music alone in the car. I no longer have this alone time and now I miss it. This forced me to find other ways to make time for reflection.” Annalise mentioned that now she takes morning walks, and her family understands that is her space. During these walks, she found time to reflect and reorganize her research program now that three research projects were cancelled or postponed. Notably, Stacey and Candace also talked about research that is on pause, which has substantive implications for tenure. Recreating protected time for reflection was important to the interviewees professionally and for well-being. Annalise even said: “I have to say what I’m coming out of COVID with ... is a lot more well-aligned and meaningful for my scholarship program, maybe, than those studies individually would have been.”

Maybe more is not always the answer. What if we continued slowing down expectations of what needs to be accomplished in relation to our work? How could this support moving away from the competitive nature of quantifiable metrics determining success? Before COVID-19, several of the participants spoke of having protected time or days. As pretenure faculty, Annalise’s and Chante’s schedules were institutionally organized to ensure one protected day without teaching, meetings, or administrative work, whereas Lisa self-organized protected days. As work entered our homes and work-hour availability could not be assumed, Candace resented the flexibility presented to her by her coworkers. When colleagues offered to have meetings during the evening or on weekends, she expressed frustration with giving up the only

time she had for herself. Lisa, in contrast, found the flexibility to be helpful, not only to herself, but with regards to her ability to supervise and support graduate students who were also facing dramatic shifts in COVID-19 lifeworlds. Lisa shared her process of balancing awareness of the graduate students' newly configured lives and her well-being: "I try to make accommodations for the different circumstances my students are facing but also try to take this into account as I'm working through my day and balancing home-life."

COVID-19 lifeworld shifts required reflection to reorganize days around the various needs and expectations in our roles as mothers and early-career academics, although finding time for that reflection was challenging. One participant, Stacey, while also going through a spousal separation, put family first and made the difficult decision to take a leave of absence from work. This allowed her to be present for and with her children: "And yes, it was tough for me to say no to things and to cancel things. That was really ... the initial was like, 'I can't believe I'm doing this.' But also, there was this like gut feeling that, 'No, my priority is my family and I will fit in what I can.'" It is tough to say "no" to things at work, particularly when pretenure, as there is a fear of being seen as unreliable bubbling under the surface. Being able to say "yes" to and prioritize family, to me, was something I had to conscientiously learn (McDermott). Other interviewees also indicated how COVID-19 created conditions of possibility and limitation to say "no" to work. I felt habitual academic identities were shifting as we sought to catch the newly configured rhythms between work and life. Similarly, with children at home, several interviewees noted how their mother identities were challenged, whether that was by way of conceding to increased nonschool-related screen time during work meetings (Stacey, Annalise, and Candace), letting children have access to social media (Cynthia), feeling guilty for desiring schools to open and reckoning with sending children into a risky environment (Candace), giving up on trying to facilitate the children's school work (Candace and Chante), or feeling happy with the cultural shifts that made it acceptable for a ten-year-old to be outside the house without adult supervision (Cynthia).

### *Renegotiating the Boundaries of Ideal Academic and Mothering Discourses*

Slowing down and realigning research as well as saying "no" to work and "yes" to home revealed a variety of ways in which the interviewees engaged, accepted, and challenged the ideal academic, unencumbered by responsibilities beyond time to read, think, and write. Annalise and Stacey expressed increasing annoyance with stories from colleagues on social media about having all this time to get research and writing projects done. Annalise said: "But if I hear one more male colleague tell me about how productive this time has been, I'm going to kick them in the face right through the zoom screen ...

they would be saying like, ‘Oh, it’s been so productive and so much time to get all that data I’ve been sitting on,’ And I’m doing a Zoom meeting with ... [my youngest] behind me asking for a snack.” Stacey shared:

You may have seen the article that was shared on social media, but it was about all of these academics being grateful they’re working from home because they get all this time to write and work on these manuscripts that have just been on the back burner ... and the piece was about how they’re all coming from male authors.... We don’t have a hope because all the parenting is landing on the mother. All the homeschooling is landing on the mother. Yeah, I’m definitely feeling that.

When our days shifted to facilitating home schooling and we had to figure out new learning management systems and tend to ours and our family’s well-being, the publish or perish pressures embedded in the competitive tenure process were acutely felt amongst the participants.

Universities responded to these different COVID-19 lifeworld configurations through automatic extensions to the tenure clock (Oleschuk). Additionally, some universities proposed foregoing student evaluations of teaching for the winter 2020 courses. For me, this second institutional offering became a limiting factor. I was hoping to include student evaluations from a new course I just taught as part of my “evidence of quality teaching” in my tenure application. Additionally, for Annalise, the yearly requirements set up to scaffold the tenure process would be incomplete without the student evaluations, and there was no clarity on how this would be addressed later on. For Chante and Lisa, the automatic tenure clock extension seemed unreasonable as they were both submitting their tenure applications this year. Chante said: “I’m not taking it because I just can’t take the stress of this for a whole ‘nother year. And then the uncertainty or if they lay people off, and I’m not tenured. So, I said, ‘No, I’m going to roll my dice.’” Lisa included this perspective: “With the current COVID-19 situation limiting knowledge mobilization activities and research, one additional year does not seem sufficient to add substantial contributions to my tenure application package/portfolio.”

I wonder, too, how the research projects that are paused or cancelled will affect tenure prospects in a few years’ time. Candace, when discussing a particularly tense relationship with her postdoctoral supervisor, aptly noted the following: “I think things are getting better now, but when I think part of what made it better is that I finally got a draft of a paper out. That’s her currency. You’re speaking her language if you’re submitting a paper.” Getting papers published is currency, an interesting economic metaphor in the marketized university, for tenure as well. Much like capitalist sensibilities, the more publications one has, the more known one becomes in their field, which

increases the relations and networks one can draw from to continue mobilizing research. What are the implications when some early career academics are in positions to be putting out more work during these times? Blanket extensions of tenure may simply become a reproduction of status quo inequities (Oleschuk). Yet I fear heading in the UK direction, where accountability metrics literally ask the question “How many papers is a baby worth” to calculate for missed publication opportunities while on maternity leave (Klocker and Drozdowski).

### **Mentoring, Representation, and Being Seen/Heard**

I empathized with an undercurrent in Candace’s narratives about her challenging relationship with her supervisor; she felt she could not become an ideal academic, and the only currency in their relationship was publications. When I asked her about her desires to continue on an academic career path, with a sigh, she said: “Over the last couple of months ... things have been really difficult with my supervisor. I have just felt like I don’t think that I really like a lot of people in academia.” Her supervisor, a full professor, is a woman without children. Janice Wallace, in her work on women in educational leadership positions, notes the importance of representation. However, she shows, women who take on leadership positions sometimes wind up proving themselves by reasserting masculinist norms and keeping other women down. For Candace, the supervisor denied her an opportunity to learn a new program critical for being competitive on the academic job market in her field. While Candace was on maternity leave, the supervisor hired someone else to learn that program and lead that portion of the project. Candace shared how her role as a mother was positioned as a limitation. About returning to work after maternity leave, she said: “The thing about coming back to work and feeling like ... I’m not good enough because I’m not as productive. Rather than feeling like now I’ve gained another level of understanding about the world, that I have something more to offer.” Later, specifically regarding her relationship with her supervisor, she said: “But for me, it’s not only this immediate kind of lag in getting out papers. It’s also the feeling of not being supported in the workplace, not being supported by other women in the workplace who don’t have kids.” I want to believe that this is an exception to unstated rules in university relations. Yet too often the tacit norms underlying processes and expectations are not questioned or explicated. Chante, for example, spoke of two moments relating to tenure and the ideal academic. The first was around unquestioned support offered to those getting their publishing rhythms going: “When they put together a writing retreat, they don’t think about women and children.... I can’t find someone to keep my kids in the summer for the entire week. So, you weren’t thinking about me as a demographic; you were thinking

about the men in the engineering school who were going to leave their kids with their wives probably.” I wonder about the link to the nonperformative possibilities within EDI statements. The department can say that they offered support, without having the responsibility to consider ways to include faculty with various life situations. Being able to access the support becomes an individualized problem, begging the question of who or what is required to diversify the university?

Another story shared by Chante animates the ways in which tenure expectations are masked behind a cheerleading approach. When I asked her about how her colleagues are supporting her in preparing for tenure, she said:

Now, at my own institution, they're supportive. [They say] 'you're going to be fine. You're okay.' But no one's saying, 'Okay, look publish in this journal because I know this editor and I can put a word in for you.' ... My foray into publications was ... I felt kind of delayed because I didn't know about the circles and who you need to talk to.... I completed my dissertation in 2012, and I was engaged in mothering. And then when I really kind of got back in the swing of things, I didn't know anybody ... so I was out of the loop for a while and that affected my ability to publish. And I didn't really understand the importance of networking and knowing the editors in order to get a publication.

When Chante shared this with me, I felt a rush of relief. It was not just me who wondered how everyone else figured this publishing game out before I did.

I want to end, however, on a promising note—one that suggests we can reconfigure how we are doing, being, and relating as academic mothers. What stands out from Candace's and Chante's stories, in particular, in addition to the continued reproduction of status quo through institutional responses that deflect responsibility, are the deep-seated roots of oppression producing and being produced by university lifeworlds. However, individuals and groups are embodying alternative relations.

Stacey noted that several leaders in her department are also mothers; they have lived university and mothering lifeworlds simultaneously. Earlier, I spoke about Chante and Lisa who decided to continue on their trajectory to apply for tenure, even though their universities extended the tenure clock. Stacey, who would potentially be going up for tenure next year, instead calmly commented that she would take as much time as she needed to get there: “I am driven to progress in this career and to be at the university until I retire. And, so, what if that takes me a couple of years longer than what my colleagues would take?” I wondered what conditions allowed Stacey to rescript the grinding, individualist, and competitive culture of tenure. Although there is no way of

knowing this for sure, Stacey took the thought swirling in my head: “And all of that recognition of putting family first given our situation has come from women who are moms and that’s really interesting to me in light of your research topic.... Because if I were in a male dominant environment, I don’t know what my experience would have been, if it would have been as understanding or what.”

As she said earlier, taking leave was a difficult decision because Stacey loves her work. However, the decision was made easier because others in her department have lived the life of academic and mother. I believe it is really important to recognize oneself in these spaces—for having the ability to have conversations with others who are navigating tenure as well as for demystifying the processes, experiences, and tacit assumptions underpinning living well in this world. Cynthia took it into her own hands to establish a community with other recently hired parents in the time of COVID-19. Perhaps there is hope for another way. I know I was inspired and gained confidence in dialoguing with other mothers of school-aged children pursuing tenure.

### **Some Final Thoughts**

As the interviewees suggest, time was negotiated, reorganized, and felt in different ways among academic mothers of school-aged children. Of course, there were innumerable factors shaping the various responses to COVID-19 lifeworld reconfigurations while pursuing tenure, and my hope for this paper is twofold—that others are able to feel seen and heard—that universities may begin reorienting tenure cultures to be more inclusive of the diverse lifeworlds their faculty inhabit. As I share some of the narratives and stories that resonated with me and challenged me to reconsider how I was reading and interpreting my experiences, I similarly urge universities to engage in more sustained and genuine dialogue with equity-seeking groups. Perhaps, then, the work of reconfiguring competitive and individualist tenure and promotion cultures undergirding who has access to and represents knowledge producers can materialize.

### **Endnotes**

All names are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and identity of the participants.

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## The Continuous Clock: A Working Academic Mother during COVID-19

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*My vision for maternity leave was quickly flipped upside down, as I had our second daughter on March 13, 2020. Amid the most significant pandemic of my lifetime, I was not prepared for what was to come over the next several months and how it would change the trajectory of my career. As a fulltime faculty member at a university, I am heavily involved in both teaching and research. During my maternity leave, I was planning to be home with my newborn for a few months while sending my older daughter to daycare. This bonding and recovery time are critical for both mom and baby. However, as universities closed, I no longer had the assistance needed to facilitate my research, nor did I have childcare. That burden was now placed back on my shoulders soon after delivery. COVID-19 has had significant effects on both the plans and expectations of mothers in academia. This piece will touch on societal expectations of mothers as well as the discrimination they have faced in academia during this crisis. I will tell a personal story as well as share stories from my peers about women's (and men's) roles and responsibilities for the family, while managing expectations as university faculty members. Four themes emerged from the qualitative interviews: productivity vs. efficiency, opportunity vs. challenge, collaborative parenting vs. parenting alone, and the repercussions from COVID-19 and responses to them. It is an important time to describe the personal and professional setbacks academic mothers have faced because of this pandemic.*

### Introduction

This article explores the personal and professional effects of COVID-19 on academic faculty members who also play a parenting role. We will take a deep dive through my personal story as a mother and academic faculty member who had a baby amid the pandemic. My life shifted from having a planned maternity leave to be a fulltime stay-at-home mother of two children under

two years old. This article also describes the perspectives of eight female and male academic faculty members on how they have been able to manage their professional workload while having to care for their children. These faculty members range in their career stage and come from nutrition and public health departments at universities across the United States. These other perspectives were included to echo the challenges I was facing as COVID-19 surged. This article aims to give insight into how academics have struggled and managed to overcome the different barriers (e.g. caring for children, disrupted research plans, and professional pressures) thrust upon them during the pandemic. Ultimately, these findings can inform and support academics who can relate to these experiences.

## Story

### *Life before Birth*

I started my academic journey as a professor in the fall of 2017; soon after, we found out that we were pregnant with our first child, which would be due at the end of my first academic year. The unplanned timing seemed perfect, as I would be able to focus on my academic responsibilities from August to April and then focus on my daughter during the summer, when my responsibilities would be a fraction of what they had been in the school year. Although my university does not have maternity leave policies set in place, I was able to reduce my workload and focus on my newborn daughter, giving her my complete love and attention. I believed I successfully achieve work-life balance and was able to be a good mother and a successful academic (Castle and Woloshyn; Houpalainen and Satama; Isgro and Castañeda). I eagerly anticipated maternity leave and was so eager to relive these moments of early motherhood with our second daughter in March 2020.

As I started the spring 2020 semester, I was vigorously trying to get as much done as I could before my planned maternity leave in March. For my teaching, I already was scheduled to teach online classes, giving me the ability to plan all the content in advance. For my research, I trained my research assistants to manage my research programs and conduct my in-person research studies. I was relieved to know they were trained and ready to step in my place to continue facilitating our research projects.

On March 10, 2020, my daughter was one week late. With the media focusing on COVID-19 and my fears of what it would mean for my delivery, I opted to get induced on the twelfth. We welcomed our new baby on March thirteenth, one of the last days that the hospital allowed two people in the delivery room and two guests to visit us in the postpartum room. As I look back at that time, I am so thankful that I was able to have my husband and birth doula in the room helping me during labour.

As I lay with my beautiful new daughter, relearning the ins and outs of breastfeeding, I soon came to realize that my maternity leave would be much different than I'd ever imagined.

### *Life after Birth*

The day after we came home from the hospital, we realized that my university would be switching to completely virtual (e.g. classes and meetings), my husband's work transitioned to telework, and my oldest daughter's school was no longer open. My hopes for my maternity leave were erased and replaced with the reality of the four of us home fulltime. I was so excited to be able to spend time as a family and watch my two girls' bond together. I was also terrified about how I was going to manage a newborn and potty-training toddler at the same time, with a fraction of sleep. I was worried that I was going to fail as a teacher, wife, and mother to my family.

The World Health Organization describes the postnatal period as "the most neglected period for the provision of quality care" ("WHO Recommendations"). It is a time when the focus is on the health and wellbeing of the newborn, yet care for the mother is almost obsolete. There is little discussion about the incredibly high rates of postpartum depression, internet misinformation, and the constant fear new mothers go through as they begin this new phase in their life. Whether it is a mother's first baby or third baby, she feels an insurmountable amount of pressure to care for herself and her baby as well as to manage her home (e.g., cooking and cleaning). These roles are deeply gendered, and COVID-19 has exacerbated them.

As a working faculty member, I was trying to balance working, caring for my two children, and recovering from my daughter's birth. As I look back, it seems like a blur. My newborn did not get the time or attention she needed and deserved as a young baby. As a mother, I worried whether she would develop normally or would she have delays in reaching milestones due to the lack of attention and care. The mom guilt was (and still is) real.

Although my teaching responsibilities were lessened due to my early preparations before my daughter's birth, my work related to my research projects was just as demanding as pre-COVID times. My research projects were forced to end early because I could not manage them. Two projects ended with a rocky finish, as the data I collected were not as complete as I would have liked. I wondered if I had made a mistake terminating some of my projects. Will the work still be able to be published even though it is missing some of the follow-up results? With only a limited amount of time to spend working at a computer, I had to drop it from my responsibilities.

There is no way to tell what is going to happen in the future, but I knew then that COVID-19 had negatively affected me personally and professionally. The inability to continue my in-person research projects and collect completed

data will have long-term implications on my ability to turn the data into publications. The phrase “publish or perish,” which is the sad reality of tenure-track faculty members (Coolidge), became very real to me. My work productivity took a step back, as did my mental and emotional health. Daily, I battle being enough as academic mother. In the words of Katharine Low and Diana Marin, “There is a silencing tension between the experience of being a new mother and the ambition for one’s work and research as a female academic” (pp.427).

### **Peer Stories**

My narrative illustrates the challenges of being a new mother and academic under COVID-19; however, it is not the only one. I have included narratives of both female and male academic faculty members who are also parents to highlight that personal and professional implications of COVID-19 on academics.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Study Population***

The study population included eight academic mothers and fathers who teach in higher education. Female faculty members were recruited on an academic Facebook page and then asked to recommend a male faculty member at their respective institution. The interviewees were a female and male from a nutrition or health related department from four different institutions, two from each. Institutions were in Florida, California, and South Carolina, which range in student population size from fifteen thousand to over fifty thousand. These institutions varied from a community college to a research-one university. All the interviewees had from one to three children, ranging in age from newborn to thirteen years.

#### ***Research Method: Semistructured Interviews***

Semistructured interviews were selected as the data collection method for this research; the interviews provided the participants’ perspectives, feelings, and emotions related to COVID-19 and its effects. Interviews were conducted in July and August 2020. I had asked some background questions about position status (i.e., tenure track vs. tenured) and number and age of their children. I asked questions related to COVID-19, including how much they were responsible for providing childcare and how it had impacted their work responsibilities. Lastly, I asked whether interviewees would have changed or kept their responses the same if they knew the pandemic was coming in advance in order to determine how they would have responded differently.

Following each female faculty members interview, I politely asked if they had a male colleague with children they could recommend for a counter perspective from their same college. The interviewees all gave their verbal consent to use their comments in this paper.

### *Data Analysis*

This study used a thematic-analytic approach to analyze the interview data. The advantage of a thematic approach is that it allows themes to naturally arise from the data rather than being predetermined by the researcher.

### *Findings*

During each of these interviews, it was apparent that COVID-19 had been both a blessing and a curse for many of these academic parents. Although they enjoyed spending more time together as a family, it often led to strains in family dynamics, work-life balance problems, and lower productivity. These findings are consistent with the research of Brooke Burk, in which the authors find teleworking has “led to an unideal merger of their personal and professional spaces, disrupting any harmony that these mothers were working so tirelessly to achieve” (pp.1). Having no distinct separate work and home spaces made it difficult to carve times specifically for work or caring for the children. Women often reported doing most of the caregiving responsibilities for children, whereas men perceived themselves as an equal partner.

In terms of parental responsibility, the findings demonstrate that each family unit is unique and functions in different capacities, so there is no blanket statement that can be made. Figure 1 is a comparative review on parental responsibility based on the interviewees’ responses. It was clear that no matter the size of the institution, female faculty members said they did more domestic labour than their male counterparts. Interestingly, as the student population size grew of the institution, there was an inverse relationship in amount of parental responsibilities expected of the father academic. Although this may not be true for each family unit, it was an interesting trend to highlight because, typically, the general perception in academia is that a higher ranked research institution is parallel to an exponentially higher demand on faculty in terms of research responsibilities.

	Position & Children (ages in years)	% watching/ caring for children	Student Population Size	Position & Children	% watching/ caring for children	
	Associate professor 2 kids (19 & 9)	70-80%	15k	Assistant professor 2 kids (2 & <1)	80-90%	
	Lecturer/ISPP Director 1 kid (<1)	50-60%	21k	Associate professor 3 kids (13, 10, 7)	75%	
	Assistant professor 2 kids (5 & 2)	50%	28k	Associate professor 1 kid (4)	75-90%*	
	Associate professor 2 kids (6 & 3)	40%*	52k	Assistant professor 2 kids (6 & 3)	30-100%*	

\*also had child(ren) taken care of by external caregiver or enrolled in school/program during March-July 2020

Figure 1: A Comparative Review of Parental Responsibility

In this article, various themes were highlighted during the data analysis. The four main ones were productivity vs. efficiency, opportunities vs. challenges, collaborative parenting vs. parenting alone, and repercussions from COVID-19 and the adjustments made.

**Productivity vs. Efficiency**

Productivity is often used as a physical concept to measure output over time, whereas efficiency describes maximizing outputs given a fixed set of resources (Sullivan et al.). In higher education, productivity is traditionally equated to a greater number of publications, secured grants, completed projects, and creation of course content. Labour productivity is hard to measure when it comes to teaching and service, all of which comprise a good percentage of tenure job responsibilities. There was a wide variety in productivity outputs from the different faculty members, with the majority reporting being less productive by 20 to 25 per cent of their normal output. The consensus was well described in the following statement: “In general, I am less productive because of taking care of my kids.” However, there was a clear shift in what they were productive at. Most felt productive when it came to their teaching and service but not so much with scholarship (e.g., publishing manuscripts and securing grants). It is at this crossroads where the theme of efficiency emerged.

Several faculty members recognized that there was less time during the day to devote to work; thus, it was imperative for them to be more efficient. What would normally take hours or days to work on was now being done in brief thirty-minute sessions. One male faculty member described it as “My work has transitioned to short bursts; there is no closing the office door and being left alone.” This is significant because it demonstrates academics can be successful, but success comes in short bursts rather than lengthy sessions. Gender did not play a role; it was seen across both genders and all academic ranks. Additionally, all faculty members expressed that they were working less

during the day and transitioned much of their work schedules to early mornings or late nights when the children were asleep. This is similar to broader findings about the detrimental effects of COVID-19 on one's sleep quality and psychological wellbeing (Salehinejad et al.).

### *Opportunity vs. Challenge*

COVID-19 has created challenges in terms of changes in job status, financial status, and security status. Despite this, every faculty member interviewed was able to see COVID-19 as an opportunity for their personal and professional life. Many described it as an opportunity to step back and appreciate being able to spend time with their kids and re-evaluate their work-life balance. Fathers enjoyed spending more time with their family, which for them was a silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fewer mothers, however, agreed to this, regardless of their position.

What opportunities and lessons has COVID-10 brought to our attention? One lesson may be that academic parents can and should improve their work-life balance and spend more time with their children. One faculty member noted that "In many ways, I think people needed a kickstart, needing to work harder on work-life balance," whereas another said, "It [COVID-19] has been a positive because it has forced a lot of people to stop and rethink to move forward."

Another opportunity that emerged was the opportunities for new avenues of research. COVID-19 brought forth new investigations of how various audiences were affected and then overcame barriers thrust upon them from the virus. Although some sought this as an opportunity, some criticized those who altered their research agendas to catch the wave of COVID-related research. One faculty member felt that "People are filling their free time with 'junk' and what will that look like as we move forwards." As an associate professor, she questioned how this distraction of pursuing scholarship opportunities outside of one's research agenda may be perceived for those trying to move forwards in the tenure process. Likewise, a junior faculty member, who thought this was a prime opportunity, realized that "lots of projects I got involved in didn't lead to anything; I wish I was more selective with new research." Such challenges were seen at all levels.

COVID-19 delivered possibilities, but it has given rise to challenges. Academic faculty, especially mothers, were challenged in more than one way, including transitioning classes to the virtual environment, stopping/adapting research endeavours, and re-evaluating their job description. There was a call to help support faculty early in the pandemic, including calls for creative a more cohesive and collaborative faculty community and redefining faculty professional development policies and practices (Baker). The faculty that I was able to interview described the challenges that they immediately faced and

continued to face as their universities shut down in March. Many of the challenges mentioned were personal, such as trying to balance teaching online and watching the kids. All four mothers described their personal struggles, such as caring for children during this time, whereas most fathers did not echo that sentiment. One female academic described that her “two worlds [academia and parenting] collided and it’s complicated.” Surprisingly, few of the challenges described had anything to do with teaching.

As teaching usually makes up at least 25 per cent of faculty workload—for some it was as high as 75 per cent—the teaching aspect was the least affected by COVID-19. The main challenge was having to shift classes from in-person to online in such a short timeframe, with little to no training in teaching online. It should be kept in mind, that these interviews were conducted in the summer, so not during the major teaching transition point in March. Beyond that, in general, faculty did not perceive teaching online as a challenge; rather, they disliked how COVID-19 was shutting down their research projects. A female junior faculty member said the following: “There is no question about men’s productivity [during this time]. They are excited to be more productive; [I] feel stressed there is so much pressure [to keep up].” Likewise, a male senior faculty member felt that he was feeling active because “he was able to focus on publications and not on hands-on research.” There was a clear distinction between pre-tenure and tenured faculty in terms of their scholarship, as the junior faculty expressed greater concerns and challenges with productivity in the COVID-19 climate. Both position ranking and gender played a role in these differences of opinion.

### *Collaborative Parenting vs. Parenting Alone*

There was a dissimilarity in attitudes towards COVID-19 between parents who had their significant other present at home compared those whose co-parent was an essential worker and out of the home. Five of the faculty members had their significant other at home all day, and three had significant others who worked outside of the home all day. The parents who adopted a more collaborative parenting model, in which they tried to split caregiving responsibilities more evenly with their partner, had more positive outlooks toward COVID-19-related changes. In describing their situation, one faculty member said, “We split the day, morning and afternoon shift, a simple trade off on the day,” whereas another said “They [responsibilities] vary day to day; its manageable when we share responsibility.” In both situations, there was a clear collaborative parenting style that was present. When responsibilities were shared between both work-at-home parents, mothers experienced fewer burdens. This finding is similar to what has been seen in the literature, which debunks the double standard that mothers have to hold the main childcare responsibilities (Thun). Thus, it was evident that collaborative parenting, even

though it was not fifty-fifty in equal duties, at least allowed both parents time to work. The three mothers who fostered a collaborative parenting style still expressed that although they shared parenting skills, their household pressures still accumulated (e.g., cooking, cleaning, and shopping). One mom described it as “a million people coming from all angles, among all of the noise, [I was] trying to weed out the needs.”

For parents who were alone with their children, there was increased frustration and stress while trying to work. Not all parents were alone during the entire summer; however, when they were alone, it was clear that the demands they faced were overwhelming. One mother felt that her childcare responsibilities really affected her work responsibilities, which caused her a lot of stress, especially since COVID-19 had hit during the middle of the semester. None of the fathers reported parenting alone for extended periods of time, unlike the academic mothers.

In addition to the parental burden, all four mothers felt a tangential burden. There was an increased reliance on the use of screen time for children for parents who parented alone compared to collaborative parenting situations. One mother felt that “There is a lot of mom guilt ... it feels like [I am] not doing enough or my child isn’t getting the attention or learning they deserve.” Likewise, all parents commented on the increased amount of screen time their children were engaged in compared to before the pandemic.

### *Repercussions*

COVID-19 caused personal, professional, and financial stress on faculty members. At the personal level, all eight faculty members felt overwhelmed and exhausted trying to keep up with their professional responsibilities while caring for their children. They felt the tensions of trying to be a good parent and a good academic. Moreover, they felt guilty allowing increased screen time to occupy their children, thus enabling them to work. This guilt is well documented, ultimately because there is a short supply of time in a given day to complete an academic workload while tending to family needs (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). Mothers have also not been able to focus on their emotional and physical health as much as before the pandemic. One mom said that COVID-19 had taken its toll on her personal health; she had gained weight, was not sleeping, and her cortisol levels were “through the roof.” Another mom said, “I feel like one thing being overshadowed in a sense is the social and emotional wellbeing of working mothers and children.” None of the fathers said COVID-19 had affected their personal health, perhaps because personal health is not often spoken about by men. It is important to highlight the personal physical and emotional strains that academic faculty members are going through. While they may be able to be professionally successful, a person’s mental health is important for their longevity.

Professionally, beyond the themes presented above, faculty members described the support they received from the upper administration as positive. They felt their chairs, deans, and other university administrators were understanding and were willing to provide ample resources to help with teaching, research, and other service responsibilities. They described how tenure-track faculty members were given extensions on their tenure clock. Additionally, they felt supported in their research transition and adaptations due to COVID-19 shutdowns. One male faculty member said, “Having upper administrative support is huge and encouraging; it takes some of the unnecessary pressure off [the tenure requirements].” Faculty members face many professional pressures to be exceptional teachers, productive researchers, and committed service personnel, so having support and leniency from upper administration were incredibly helpful.

Lastly, there were several faculty members who described the financial stress caused by the virus. At the end of these summer interviews, none of the faculty reported any job losses themselves or of their significant other. However, several faculty members described that being home all summer with their kids had resulted in some increased costs, such as meals, entertainment, and home projects. Additionally, there was an increased need for external caregivers (e.g., babysitters, daycare, and camps) to help provide some free time to the faculty to be able to focus and work more. Responses were location and time dependent, as COVID-19 initially shut down all cities, with some returning to some sense of normalcy more quickly than others. Regardless of location, half of the participants indicated they requested childcare assistance from friends or family during the summer months. As campuses reopened and jobs ramped up for the fall, one faculty member indicated that abruptly changing childcare options resulted in great financial strain.

## **Conclusion**

This article has described experiences in relation to the demand of being a parent and an academic faculty member under COVID-19, which has had a significant impact on the personal and professional expectations of academic parents. It was shown that women experienced a greater burden of caregiving responsibilities; however, each family unit was able to find a solution that worked out best for their families. Each family unit had to navigate the division of responsibility for children, as both parents worked at home or away, modified financial expenditures, altered the time allocated for personal health, and adjusted professional responsibilities. Although only some faculty members had family or friends readily available for childcare assistance, others were faced with tough decisions concerning the delicate balance of managing children and work responsibilities. Clearly, there was no one-size-fits-all

approach for academics the United States.

Women felt a greater impact from the pandemic on them personally and professionally as compared to their male counterparts. For these women, traditional motherhood roles and responsibilities were incredibly demanding. COVID-19 exacerbated mothers' roles and responsibilities, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and strained mentally, physically, and emotionally. Only time will tell how academic mothers will be affected professionally long-term and if they will be disproportionately affected when it comes to tenure and promotion in the future.

This article does not describe all perspectives of academic parents. Rather, it has explored how both mothers and fathers have felt the burden of COVID-19 and serves to kickstart future dialogue around the short- and long-term implications of COVID-19 on the success of academic parents.

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HEATHER K. OLSON BEAL

## Surviving the COVID-19 Pandemic with a Wolf Pack and the Marco Polo App

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*This narrative nonfiction essay explores the ways in which a group of academic mothers used Marco Polo, a video instant messaging app, to remain tethered to each other and to their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The mothers, who are a combination of millennial and Gen Xers with children aged two to twenty-three, hail from a range of academic disciplines (e.g., theatre, education, environmental science, community health, counseling, psychology, and hospitality administration). We were all well into our careers and accustomed to grappling with the myriad ways in which the things we were raised to believe—that we could do anything we put our minds to and could definitely be mothers and career women—sometimes still felt like a pipe dream. And then COVID-19 came barreling into our lives, laying waste to all the usual coping and time management strategies upon which we typically rely. Since mid-March, we have exchanged an average of between fifty and seventy-five Marco Polo messages per day and have covered a wide range of topics—from spice storage methods, to preferred Cheeto shapes, to teaching our children to do long division while attending Zoom meetings, and to watching our male colleagues soar in terms of research productivity while we struggle to find five minutes of uninterrupted time to respond to an email. The essay offers some speculative ideas as to the role Marco Polo played in a larger story about connections between adult women during challenging times.*

I grew up in a traditional faith community that prizes motherhood as a woman's primary purpose in life. Mormon women are taught that motherhood "is the essence of who we are as women. It defines our very identity, our divine stature and nature" (Dew). It is, quite simply, what women do and who we are. My own mother broke the mould and worked outside of the home, but she was the exception rather than the rule. I likewise dreamed about and eventually trained for a career, but I always knew that I would become a mother. It was,

in that oh-too-small world, the only legitimate way for a woman to create a meaningful life.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I became a mother and discovered that it was really, really hard. And that I didn't love it. It had honestly never occurred to me that I wouldn't love it. It was supposed to be my *raison d'être*. Instead, I felt like I was playing a role for which I was ill-suited and had been inadequately prepared. I often felt like I was losing sight of, and sometimes couldn't even remember, the person I was outside of the role of mother. I got married when I was nineteen and had my first daughter when I was twenty-three, so I didn't have much of an independent adult life before marriage and motherhood. I often found myself wondering, "Did I ever not have these kids?" and feeling as if my kids deserved a better mom than I was.

But then Kennedy, my oldest daughter, became a senior in high school, and I discovered a whole new mothering phase—mothering teenagers and emergent adults. Her senior year was my best motherhood year yet. Whereas the mothers of so many of her friends and my own friends bemoaned how difficult their kids were that year and how ready they were for them to graduate and move out, I was on cloud nine, feeling like, this motherhood I can do. She was seventeen; my next daughter was fourteen, and my son was eleven. They were growing up. They were snarky and fun and funny. So funny. We had engaging, stimulating conversations. They bathed and brushed their teeth without reminders.

And then, in 2015, just like that, it seemed, she graduated and left. I was bereft. Our family felt broken. Misshapen. Missing a fundamental piece. And then, just three years later, Marin (our middle daughter) left as well. I knew it was going to be hard, since I'd already done it once, but her departure similarly sucked the wind clean out of me.

Just when things were getting fun, they were gone.

What was I to do with just one kid at home? And he was 15 and quite independent, so he mostly only needed me for rides and money. After twenty-one years of intense parenting, I felt a bit adrift.

Luckily, I had tenure, so I had some breathing room at work. I looked at my women friends and colleagues on campus and made a conscious decision sometime in 2017 to find ways to support them. A few women had really helped me with both my career and with motherhood, so I decided it was time to pay it forward. I latched onto the idea that women had to help ourselves and help each other. I developed a program to help connect new faculty to one another and to existing faculty at my university. I invited junior faculty to work on some writing projects with me that we collaboratively saw through to publication. I started a writing group with women in my department, which felt like a good way to make use of the additional time and energy I had now that my girls were no longer living at home and needing my attention the way they once had.

On a more personal scale, I invited ten of my favourite women—all of whom were also colleagues at our regional comprehensive university in Deep East Texas—to join a secret and closed Facebook group in early 2018, which we jokingly called the “coven.” Over five to ten years, we had developed professional connections and personal friendships with each other, forged largely out of a (sometimes) desperate need to find likeminded souls as we went through life in a deep red part of the country. It’s not easy out here to be a professor, a mother, and an ardent feminist. We needed a digital space to support one another.

There are eleven of us, including me: ten professors and one who works in student affairs. Ten of us are married. Nine are mothers. Between us, we have twenty kids, ranging in age from two to twenty-three. We are now in our thirties, forties, and early fifties. We all have terminal degrees—except for one, who is currently pursuing her doctorate. We hail from a range of academic disciplines, including counseling, education, theatre, biology, public health, environmental science, psychology, and hospitality. We are all white, and we are all cisgender, and eight of us are tenured or have tenure-track positions. Pre-COVID, all of us had the luxury of stable employment. We are an admittedly privileged bunch.

In May 2018, just a few months after our group formed, Abby Wambach gave her now famous speech at Barnard College, in which she recounts the story of what happened in 1995 when wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park. Rather than threatening the system, the reintroduction of the wolves helped stabilize the whole ecosystem. As Wambach recounted, “The wolves, who were feared as a threat to the system, turned out to be its salvation. Barnard women, are you picking up what I’m laying down here? Women are feared as a threat to our system—and we will also be our society’s salvation.” Later in the speech, she told the Barnard women in attendance: “Women. At this moment in history leadership is calling us to say: Give me the effing ball. Give me the effing job. Give me the same pay that the guy next to me gets. Give me the promotion. Give me the microphone. Give me the oval office. Give me the respect I’ve earned and give it to my wolf pack, too.”

A group member posted a link to Wambach’s speech in our Facebook group, which said, “Can we change ‘coven’ to ‘Wolf Pack?’” and everyone agreed. So, the Wolf Pack assembled. We rallied around each other when someone had been slighted at work, making wine and chocolate home deliveries to cheer someone up or delivering coffee to the theatre prof who was on campus late nights and weekends. We celebrated each other’s birthdays. We helped each other handle difficult supervisors, students, and colleagues. We asked for support to get through especially difficult days or life challenges. We started making plans to create a women’s organization to advocate for women on

campus. The first time someone called me the “matriarch” of the group, I scoffed. Nothing about me was mother-y. However, I had to admit that what we were doing for one another looked and even felt a lot like mothering. As I turned my attention to my women friends and colleagues, I occasionally caught glimpses of what my life may look like, moving forwards, once all three kids moved away from home.

Fast forward to March 2020, almost two years after I started our group. Kennedy was in law school in Baton Rouge, Marin was in her sophomore year of undergrad in Houston, and Stuart (the youngest) was a high school junior. During spring break, my husband, Stuart, and I travelled to Houston and Baton Rouge because we knew we may not otherwise see them until mid-May when their spring semesters ended. We were beginning to get nervous about COVID-19 but naively thought we were somehow insulated from it.

And then, just a week after our visits to see them, both girls were home. Everything had shut down. Both their universities, my university, my husband’s university, and the local public schools (where our youngest son was a junior) moved to fully online classes. Everyone I knew was hunkered down. Everything felt so precarious. I didn’t leave my house for two weeks except to drive around aimlessly with my husband sometimes at night. We stockpiled food. We rationed toilet paper. We worried about long-term job security.

The whole world seemed to be unravelling. COVID-19 cases were steadily increasing. People were dying. Millions of Americans were losing their jobs. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was conducting raids at food processing plants. Protests raged all summer long against police brutality—even in our rural community. Wildfires and hurricanes ravaged communities. I was distraught by what was happening across the country. I feared for the safety of our elections. I worried about one of us getting COVID-19. I could not see my aging parents because of the risk of COVID-19 transmission. The state high school debate tournament, for which my son had worked so hard to qualify, was cancelled. I grieved for all the important school and life events my kids were missing.

But (and this feels like a confession) despite all the uncertainty and fear, I was secretly thrilled to have the girls home. The kids were all happy to see one another again and grateful for what they thought was a temporary respite from school. They went for long walks together every evening. We had rousing arguments about political candidates. We watched movies together at night. They cajoled my husband and me into learning a TikTok dance (which I assume was later posted on TikTok and rightly mocked). We rearranged space in the house to accommodate everyone working and schooling from home and settled into a new routine. It was so deeply satisfying to see them enjoying one another’s company. I sometimes went to bed, feeling like maybe my mothering hadn’t all been terrible; they were growing into genuinely lovely young adults,

who liked one another—and us!

Even though I was glad to have them home, I also really missed my Wolf Pack friends. Prior to COVID-19, I saw them every day in meetings or walking across campus. Since the girls had moved away, I had grown accustomed to meeting my friends for lunch and occasional meetups at a local bar. We infrequently managed a meetup at my house during which we laughed and commiserated and ate a lot of Little Debbie Nutty Buddies and chips. Suddenly, none of that could happen anymore. I sometimes experienced feelings of isolation reminiscent of what I had experienced when the kids were younger and we were more homebound. Facebook suddenly felt stale and empty. I think it had worked as a filler—a place to finish conversations we had started face-to-face—but it was a poor substitute for the kind of face-to-face interaction we were craving.

So, I started a Marco Polo group and invited the Wolf Pack to join.

Apparently, we weren't alone. News articles have reported a huge increase in Marco Polo app usage since mid-March 2020, which is when the shelter-in-place orders started in parts of the United States (Perez; O'Brien; Melton). *TechCrunch* reported that twenty million video messages were shared via Marco Polo in one twenty-four-hour period alone in April (Perez).

So, what is Marco Polo and how does it work?

Michal and Vlada Bortnik created the Marco Polo app in 2016 to facilitate communication with Polish relatives. A 2018 *Houston Press* article dubs Marco Polo “Snapchat for old people” (Balke). *Forbes* attributes the popularity of Marco Polo to its simplicity (Melton). It uses up significantly less bandwidth than other video platforms, such as Zoom, FaceTime, and Facebook video chat. It's straightforward—users set up an account and send video messages to individual friends or to groups of friends, who can watch and respond to the messages whenever it's convenient for them. There are no “likes” or “dislikes.” You cannot be tagged by others in photos or posts. There is no possibility for strangers to see or comment on your posts. The purpose of the app is for small(er) groups of friends and families to connect, remotely. And it's all asynchronous. Maybe that makes it the perfect app for working moms who are juggling fulltime careers, caring for children, and helping to school children from home while quarantined.

In our early quarantine Marco Polo days, we sent maybe ten to twenty total messages per day. As the spring semester continued, virtually, along with our consequent isolation, the number of messages grew exponentially. Now, a typical day includes at least one hundred messages. On weekends, we sometimes approach two hundred messages a day. Remember, there are eleven of us, and some of these messages are maybe only ten to fifteen seconds long. And, sometimes, days go by, and you don't have even a minute to look at it, and there may be three hundred messages when you come back. At that point,

you have no choice but to just skip over them and jump into the present Marco Polo moment.

We check in with each other, to report on how we're feeling about another day, or to express worry and ask for support regarding a difficult family or work thing happening that day. There is typically a flurry of messages that comes in the morning, and then the messages slow down, a bit, as we settle into our workdays and (try to) concentrate on work tasks. Though really, what does "concentrate" even mean anymore? We are moms, at home with demanding toddlers, needy elementary school kids, sullen middle schoolers, grumpy high schoolers, and depressed college students marooned at home due to the shutdown. What does it mean, for us, during this pandemic, to just sit down and "concentrate"? Our "polos" (i.e., shorthand for messages we send via the app) are interrupted and punctuated by such things as: a middle schooler coming home from a first day of school and stripping all their clothes off in the doorway and coming into the house in their underwear to talk about their day; an elementary schooler asking who in his mom's Marco Polo group wants to see him make bubbles out of his own spit; a toddler running around, grabbing something in the air, and saying she "caught the virus"; a teen practicing a rousing and dissonant Bela Bartok piece in the room next to his mom's "office"; an elementary schooler snagging her mom's phone, opening the app, and posting photo bomb-style videos of herself for us to watch later; chickens clucking in the background; lots of dogs barking and biting and even sometimes stealing a kid's lunch right off of their plate; and a high schooler and two emergent adult children doing dance parties in the kitchen to rap music that is definitely not safe for work.

You get the picture. The polos are recorded at our desks or whatever we are using at home for a desk, such as outside in a carport, sometimes while driving, and, not infrequently, while hiding out in a bathroom or closet—trying, desperately, to just have a few tiny uninterrupted moments.

So, what is happening here? What do we do? (Or, as some of our partners and children sometimes ask, "What are y'all doing?")

We talk. We vent. We laugh. We share childhood stories. We talk about depression, anxiety, and therapy. We talk a lot about COVID-19. We talk about our kids. We talk about work, a lot. Some of us cry. We ask for support. We kvetch about our supervisors, a lot. We talk about politics. We wring our hands. We validate each other. We hype each other. We do silly "unboxing" videos of subscription boxes we've signed up for during quarantine—a feminist book club, Hello Fresh, Imperfect Produce, Winc, etc. We make plans for the women's organization on campus.

I suppose this could just be the pandemic version of meeting up for lunch with friends on a workday or grabbing a drink after work.

But maybe, we are, quite simply, just bored. After seven months, we have

grown tired of only seeing the people in our immediate families with whom we are quarantined. It's fun to know that—almost always—if we get on Marco Polo, someone will be there to listen. We have talked about so many topics—big, important things but also completely inane things. We are starved for social interaction. We have made polos showing each other how we organize our spices or showing off all the candy sprinkles in our pantries. We have discussed our preferred Cheeto shapes. We have all taken a BuzzFeed quiz that answered the burning question, “If you were a potato, what kind would you be?” And we joked about the answers for days. I even once made a polo of myself, while climbing up my attic stairs, to show our group how our attic was organized. Some of these things are things we might have shared prepandemic. But the organization (or not) of our spices? I think not.

Maybe we are pushing back against our isolation at home, in close quarters with our children and/or partners, around the clock. We did not choose to spend 24/7 with our babies, children, teenagers, or even our emergent adult children. We chose to spend most of our days in the company of other adults. Then COVID-19 came barreling into our lives, laying waste to whatever boundaries we had between work and home. We found ourselves immersed in home and family life, isolated from our work, our students, our colleagues, and each other. Some of us worry that COVID-19 is both poleaxing our careers and thwarting our mothering efforts. Many news articles attest to the fact that COVID-19 has hit women, and especially working mothers, particularly hard. An ongoing University of Southern California study suggests that one-third of working mothers in two-parent households are doing all the childcare, compared to only one-tenth of working fathers. As Gema Zamarro has explained: “Considering women already shouldered a greater burden for child-care prior to the pandemic, it’s unsurprising the demands are now even greater ... the pandemic has had a disproportionately detrimental impact on the mental health of women, particularly those with kids” (qtd. Miller). This study also shows that women with kids are most likely to experience psychological distress, depression, and anxiety. Working, college-educated mothers reported having had to reduce their working hours more than women without children and more than men. One study shows that fathers increased their childcare work during the pandemic, but mothers still did most of the care work. The quarantine has exposed that less progress has been made than we might have wished in terms of household and childcare divisions of labour.

Perhaps, Marco Polo is filling a void we were already living with but didn't recognize or that we had come to accept as normal. What we've been doing every day during quarantine couldn't be more different from our normal lives in academia. Our regular lives are sterile; our days quiet. Sure, we go to class and attend committee meetings, but we also spend a lot of time, in our offices,

alone. Our work is very compartmentalized. The three pots (i.e., service, research, teaching) really don't mix. We usually do just one of those things at a time. We get ready for each day, meaning we put on work clothes, maybe some makeup and shoes. A necklace or some earrings. Maybe even a bracelet. When we get home, all of that comes off. We put on stretchy pants, we take off the earrings, and we wipe off the makeup. We settle in for our home life, which is casual and informal—a contrast to our daily work lives.

And then came COVID-19. All previous norms about privacy, objectivity, and compartmentalization flew out the window. Most of us in the Wolf Pack were teaching on Zoom in stretchy pants while our kids played at our feet. No makeup, no work clothes, no shoes. Shoot, I have worn a bra exactly four times in seven months. There is no more professionalism. There is only life, while working and caring for kids, during a pandemic. There are no more boundaries between work and home.

So maybe Marco Polo is how we are accepting the chaos? Maybe even embracing it? There is little sense of privacy. In Marco Polo, we are in each other's homes, for probably sixteen to eighteen hours, off and on, of course, every day. One member in our group regularly makes postshower polos while wrapped in a bath towel. More than one of us shows up in polos in a bra. We send polos while in our PJs, in bed, sometimes right before falling asleep or right after waking up. There is almost always someone on Marco Polo. We are rarely without a listening (Marco Polo) ear. We sometimes hear a snippet of an argument between one of us and a partner. Or we hear one of us lose our cool with one of our kids. It happens. It's a pandemic, after all.

Finally, Marco Polo isn't just a diversion; we also polo a lot about work projects. I don't even know how many smaller groups have spun off from our original group. Each of the smaller groups has a unique focus. One is for women in the same department at our university; another is for women who are trying to get student loan forgiveness, and two others are for women who wrote grants together over the summer. At least two more focus on coauthored writing projects. In addition, I have one-on-one Marco Polo groups with each woman in the group, for when we just need to talk to the one person. I'm guessing there are lots more groups and combinations of people that I'm not a part of.

This is part of how we are working now. We can't do what we used to do. COVID-19 took away all the separations between work and home. We can't go to the office while kids are at school or in daycare and have uninterrupted time to teach, meet with students, or work on writing projects. So, we improvised. We found an app that enables us to work in and around the increased fragmentation of our lives due to COVID-19. We sometimes feel sheepish about it. Our kids and spouses tease us about the time we spend on Marco Polo. But in addition to the silly conversations, we have also used it to coordinate the teaching of dozens of courses and the beginnings and endings

of numerous research projects. Our campus women's organization—which was just a Wolf Pack idea a year or two ago—officially launched in September; we had sixty people in attendance via Zoom at our October meeting. Several of us submitted grants over the summer—completed largely due to hundreds of short polos sent in and around and through the crevices of mothering at home and helping our children with schoolwork during a pandemic. I think in some ways that this has always been the reality for working mothers—accomplishing tasks in tiny snippets of time, multitasking during carpool, or firing off one more message before settling in for bedtime with a young child—but COVID-19 has made it so that all of our work is now being done in this way.

Now it's October. The fall semester is well underway. My girls flew the coop, again, returning to their college student lives, crossing their fingers that neither they nor their roommates got COVID-19. We're back to just one kid at home, so the house is quiet again. And he got his driver's license, so he doesn't even need me for rides anymore. Everyone in our Marco Polo group is teaching via Zoom and working remotely. Many of us are struggling to facilitate pandemic online schooling for our kids. Some of our kids who excelled in school are now failing or just barely making it. Some of us are struggling with marital problems and partners with unstable employment. Several of us have had to quarantine when a spouse tested positive for COVID-19. Some of our older kids have anxiety and depression, brought on by COVID-19.

Our Wolf Pack Polo group persists. I can't speak for anyone else. I can only try to explain why I continue to need and appreciate it. I need people in my life, more than ever during this global pandemic. I need to be able to talk to, listen to, and see my friends and colleagues. And I need to be able to do it in tiny pockets of time that fit into my quarantine life. And, my friends and colleagues, most of whom are mothers with young children at home, need that even more.

I don't know whether our Marco Polo usage will continue once the pandemic ends, assuming it does, indeed, end. (It has to end ... right?) At the end of this school year, I will officially be an empty nester. I am scared. I feel like I'm standing at the edge of a precipice. Mothering young children was hard, but empty nesting may just be harder. I don't know how that transition will go, but one thing is sure: I'm going to need my Wolf Pack after my last child flies the coop.

Right now, Marco Polo is enabling us to do what women have always done: create and nurture a community of peers with whom to share our wins, grieve our losses, and support each other as we continue to wake up, each new quarantine day, and put one tired foot in front of the other.

And we'll keep doing that, Marco Polo or not.

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## The Challenges of Being a Mother and an Academic Researcher during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil

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*Mothers all over the world are feeling overwhelmed and exhausted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Academic mothers, particularly, have been struggling with deadlines and productivity demands. In fact, mothers are experiencing the most challenging time in the recent history of Brazil while working and mothering children from home. In this paper, we argue Brazilian academic mothers' challenges, which were already pervasive and inherent in Brazilian society before COVID-19, have become even more taxing due the current right-wing government's policies in the pandemic that have exacerbated existing inequalities. Based on a literature review and quantitative and qualitative data, we present key findings of the ongoing research project—"Brazilian Mothers, Media, and COVID-19"—to illustrate the difficulties the pandemic has caused for Brazilian mothers. We note how patriarchal motherhood still shapes the ways many of Brazilian women mother their children, as they remain isolated, deal with maternal roles individually, and have little social or governmental support. Finally, we highlight the need for Brazilian mothers to learn how to mother their children with media literacy and conclude by bringing some hope to this unacceptable scenario by encouraging further collaboration among academic mothers in Brazil.*

### Introduction

Since March 2020, mothers around the globe have felt exhausted and overwhelmed while isolated at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have become responsible for a myriad of responsibilities, including housework, paid labour, mother work, and the homeschooling of children. Moreover, many mothers are also struggling with income reduction, unemployment,

financial or housing instability, domestic violence, food insecurity, health concerns, and single parenting. (O'Reilly, "Trying" 7-8).

This paper discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the daily lives of Brazilian mothers, especially in relation to domestic work and mothering activities. We present key findings of the project "Brazilian Mothers, Media, and COVID-19," which includes a literature review as well as quantitative and qualitative fieldwork. The results highlight many similarities between the problems facing mothers around the world and the problems with Brazilian mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we argue the Brazilian socio-political environment creates additional concerns and challenges for Brazilian mothers in general, and academic mothers in particular, because of an especially troubling combination of adversities that exists in 2020 Brazil. Furthermore, academic mothers tend to be more aware of structural inequalities in the country. As claimed by the Fernanda Staniscuski et al, "We cannot allow this pandemic to reverse advances and further deepen the gender gap in science" (724).

As reported by the international press, the current Brazilian federal government's policies have been devastating for higher education, including a significant reduction in research budgets: "Brazil's main science funding has dropped from a peak of nearly 14 billion reais (about US\$2.55 billion) in 2014—just before a crippling 2-year economic recession—to around 4.4 billion reais in 2020" (Tollefson). However, the pressure to publish is still ongoing, despite the absence of family, society, or government support. Indeed, these additional obstacles deeply affect mothers in the professional and personal realms. Furthermore, it has been extremely difficult for socially isolated mothers to engage in collective action to promote social change.

First, we present the socio-political background of the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil by describing the country's structural inequalities and the questionable pandemic measures taken by the current federal government. Second, we present key findings of the aforementioned research project to illustrate how difficult the pandemic has been for Brazilian mothers. Next, we present the pandemic journeys of three academic mothers. Then, we argue that the Brazilian sociopolitical situation has exacerbated the difficult working conditions of academic mothers, citing evidence from a survey conducted by the Parent in Science network. Finally, we conclude the paper bringing some hope to this critical scenario by encouraging further collaboration among academic mothers in Brazil.

## **Sociopolitical Background: Structural Inequalities and the COVID 19 Crisis in Brazil**

Brazil is shaped by several structural inequalities related to income, education, poverty, race and gender, unemployment, housing, and domestic violence. These disparities help us to understand the severity of the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil.

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Brazil is the seventh most unequal country in the world, and 42 per cent of the total income of the country is in the hands of just 10 per cent of the Brazilian population. Brazil is in seventy-ninth position out of 189 countries and territories in the 2019 UNDP Human Development Index 2019, which is a similar position to Mexico (seventy-sixth), and Peru (eighty-second) but is significantly lower than developed countries, such as Canada (thirteenth) or the United States (fifteenth).

Additionally, as revealed by Continuous PNAD<sup>1</sup> 2019, 51.2 per cent of the adult population, totaling 69.5 million Brazilians, have not completed high school (PNAD IBGE). Moreover, IBGE indicates that 10.3 million Brazilian citizens suffered severe food deprivation from 2017 to 2018, while 50 per cent of the Brazilian households experiencing food insecurity were headed by women (Cabral). Particularly, 32.9 per cent of Black and Brown<sup>2</sup> Brazilians live on USD 5.50 a day or less. The governmental agency also shows that the income of white men is 44.4 per cent higher than Black and Brown women's income in Brazil (IBGE, Estudos e Pesquisas 1-3).

Another key structural inequality is the participation of women in the Brazilian workforce. Results from Continuous PNAD 2018 indicate that of the 6.2 million Brazilian domestic workers, 4.5 million are women. Furthermore, 96.4 per cent of Brazilian nannies and 97.3 per cent of the nursery and primary school teachers are women. In fact, women constitute the majority of the workforce dedicated to childcare, domestic service, pedagogy, nursing, primary and high school education, and psychology (Perissé and Loschi 23-24). Gender inequality is also observed in academia, and although there is a similar number of male and female university professors nationally, men still occupy most leadership positions in Brazilian universities. So, there are fewer women than men in Brazil working as research coordinators, full professors, department heads, and university deans (Batista and Righetti). Furthermore, unemployment levels confirm that inequalities persist in terms of gender and race. According to IBGE, the national unemployment rate reached 14.9 per cent among Brazilian women and 12 per cent among Brazilian men between April and June 2020. Moreover, it reached 17.8 per cent among Black workers and 15.4 per cent among Brown workers, but only 10.4 per cent among white workers in the same period (Nery).

Roberta Oliveira et al. highlight that Brazilian low-income and informal market workers are mostly Black people who live in vulnerable areas, such as the favelas, which are high density urban regions, with inadequate infrastructure of sanitation, garbage collection, and running water supply. These authors emphasize that the incidence and mortality of COVID-19 in Brazil has been higher within Black, Brown, and Indigenous populations (1-5). As indicated by IBGE 2019, oftentimes, three people share the same bedroom in homes in the favelas (6), which makes social distancing impossible.

Finally, Brazilian homes are not safe environments. As highlighted by the Brazilian Public Security Forum (6), there was a 22.2 per cent increase in femicides in twelve Brazilian states from March to April 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. Soon after state governments implemented social distancing measures in April 2020, the Forum also reported a 37.6 per cent increase in calls to the government helpline for violence against girls and women (11).

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened preexisting socioeconomic inequalities in Brazil. Although many middle- and upper-class Brazilians have formal jobs and can work from home, the situation of the lower-class Brazilian majority is dire. Most cannot follow the recommendation to stay home while struggling with poverty and hunger because they have informal jobs or are unemployed during the pandemic. In this sense, whereas many countries have a single but powerful enemy to battle in the coronavirus pandemic, Brazil has two: COVID-19 and the federal government's response to the Pandemic. With a population of 210 million, as of November 11, 2020, Brazil had 5,657,032 confirmed cases and 162,628 deaths from COVID-19—second place in the World Health Organization's (WHO) COVID-19 world ranking.

Ortega and Orsini describe the Brazilian situation “as governance without “central” government,” reporting “graves had to be dug with excavators to deal with swelling demand” (1) in Amazonas state, while São Paulo needed to build a new cemetery. On July 7, 2020, Bolsonaro declared he tested positive, told the press he was using hydroxychloroquine, and also encouraged the population to take this discredited ‘treatment’ (Ortega and Orsini 1).

As Fabiana Ribeiro and Anja Leist point out, instead of providing scientific-based information for the population and investing in clear communication campaigns, the federal government is denying the impact of COVID-19, thus confusing the population (1-3). Francisco Ortega and Michael Orsini argue that the current post-truth context becomes more complex when ignorance is politically destructive and emphasize that Bolsonaro's science denialism is harming democratic governance:

The defense of chloroquine and vertical isolation led to the dismissal of two health ministers in less than a month, Henrique Mandetta and Nelson Teich, both of whom are medical doctors. They were temporarily replaced a general with no medical training, Eduardo Pazuello, who militarized the leadership of the Ministry of Health and immediately created a protocol for chloroquine treatment with SUS.<sup>3(7)</sup>

By spreading denialism and ignorance among the Brazilian people through the media, Bolsonaro's government has polarized public opinion. Consequently, the lack of trust in science and in the Brazilian press grows exponentially among the population. Thus, many Brazilians, whose schooling and media literacy tend to be low, feel confused and insecure about most information they receive from mass media but especially that information they get through social media networks.<sup>4</sup>

Yet activists, opinion leaders and scientists seek to combat disinformation by disseminating scientific evidence and true facts on social media. For this reason, scientific discourse has unfortunately been associated with opposition to the federal government within the realm of political disputes (Nobre). In this sense, constant political attacks on science are affecting academic mothers.

## **Methodology**

This study combined a literature review, aimed at describing the Brazilian context, as well as online quantitative and qualitative fieldwork research. The quantitative survey was conducted by Milena Oliveira-Cruz, who coordinated a team of ten students from the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM) to collect the data and perform the analysis. The questionnaire comprised twenty-five questions, investigating women's perceptions of motherhood and how the pandemic has changed their mothering experiences. The quantitative questionnaire was conducted online, using the Google Forms platform, from June 6 to July 2, 2020. The total sample of 2,194 mothers, residing in the five regions of Brazil, had the following characteristics:

**Table 1. Sample Profile**

<b>Education</b>	
Graduate degree	<b>56.8%</b>
Undergraduate degree	<b>26.4%</b>
Incomplete graduate degree	8.4%
High school	6.0%
Incomplete high school	2.4%
<b>Number of children</b>	
One child	<b>54.5%</b>
Two children	<b>38.2%</b>
Three children	6.3%
Four children	1.0%
<b>Mother's status</b>	
Married to the child's father	<b>79.6%</b>
Married to someone other than the child's father	4.1%
Single mother with support network	6.7%
Single mother without support network	4.6%
Mother with shared custody	5.5%
<b>Age</b>	
18-25	4.3%
26-30	9.1%
31-35	<b>22.4%</b>
36-40	<b>29.0%</b>
41-45	<b>24.0%</b>
More than 45	11.3%
<b>Monthly family income per household in SM</b>	
1 SM	3.6%
1 to 3 SM	14.2%
3 to 5 SM	17.7%
5 to 10 SM	<b>26.3%</b>
10 to 15 SM	16.6%
More than 15 SM	<b>21.5%</b>

Source: Authors 2020

In 2020, the Brazilian national minimum wage (salário mínimo nacional or SM in Portuguese) is 1,045.00 Brazilian reais a month. On November 5, 2020, it was equivalent to 245.35 Canadian dollars. This means the monthly family income of 61.8 per cent of the sample would vary from 245.35 to 2,453.50 Canadian dollars, while only 21.5 per cent of those families would earn more than 3,680.25 Canadian dollars per month.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the respondents are married (83.7 per cent), have only one child (54.5 per cent) and have completed graduate school (56.8 per cent). Therefore, the sample represents a privileged section of the Brazilian population, especially regarding cultural capital. According to the *Education at a Glance Report*, by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, “In 2019, 21% of 25–34-year-olds had a tertiary degree in Brazil compared to 45% on average across OECD countries” (OECD). The presence or absence of a partner in raising children is a relevant variable in the sample, since eleven million Brazilian families are headed by single mothers with children up to fourteen years of age (Bianconi).

The online qualitative fieldwork started in July 2020. It consisted of ten in-depth interviews, using WhatsApp and Google Meet, with mothers from different regions and states of Brazil, who have one or more children up to thirteen years of age. Some raise their children alone, others with partners; the sample includes married, divorced, and single women. They work in several areas (journalism, knowledge and business management, tourism, design, cultural production, history, and literature) in the labour market or in academia (as graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and professors).

In this article, we describe the pandemic journeys of three academic mothers. Each qualitative interview lasted fifty to ninety minutes. We report their maternal experiences during the pandemic and focus on three issues: how mothers are feeling, what has changed in their mothering routines, and how they are interacting with the media during the pandemic.

## Key Findings

### *Effects of Motherhood on Women's Lives*

Most respondents recognized the effects of motherhood on their lives: 76 per cent agreed (in part or totally) that they make sacrifices for their children. However, the association between motherhood and altruism is not generally questioned by the sample: 55 per cent of the interviewees said that they considered it right or expected that mothers sacrifice themselves for their children, and 68 per cent of the sample understood that maternal love and affection for children is different from paternal love for children.

Most interviewees tended to integrate the changes resulting from motherhood in their lives with ideological assumptions of patriarchal

motherhood, as described by Andrea O'Reilly in *Matricentric Feminism*. This fact was especially evidenced in the assumption of individualization, which reflects an understanding of motherhood as an individual responsibility, centred solely on the figure of the mother. The assumption of normalization was also important in the interviews; this idea limits and restricts maternal identities and roles to the specific model of the nuclear family, in which the mother is the wife and main caregiver of the children, and the husband is the economic provider.

The participants reported that the vital changes after motherhood also encompass the relationship with themselves and with third parties, in addition to their own plans and outlook for the future. For 76 per cent of the sample, motherhood changed the relationship they have with their own bodies; 75 per cent of the interviewees stated that the birth of their children changed the relationship with their partners, and 84 per cent considered that motherhood changed their relationship with paid work.

### ***Paid Work, Housework, and Motherhood***

Reconciling paid work, housework, and motherhood was a difficulty for women in Brazil long before the pandemic. According to data by the PNAD IBGE, on average, Brazilian men devote eleven hours a week to housework and care, whereas Brazilian women devote 21.4 hours (PNAD IBGE 2019). According to a report published on the INSPER portal, more than 25 per cent of women leave their jobs after becoming mothers, compared to only 5 per cent of men; 21 per cent of mothers take more than three years to return to work. Consequently, caring for the home and children is an important factor in understanding how Brazilian women manage time and priorities and make life choices. In addition to the extra hours spent doing domestic work, they have either to reorganize their careers or quit their jobs to care for the children, a reality that men do not have to face. The lack of public policies and childcare provision makes it particularly difficult for low-income mothers.

### ***Mothering in the Pandemic: Challenges of Working at Home and Face-to-Face***

When analyzing how the pandemic affects the mothering and paid work routines of interviewees, two aspects stood out. First, the majority of the sample stated that they are working from home. As a result, they are facing the challenge of reconciling domestic, maternal, and professional demands in the same space and time. Meanwhile, 47.3 per cent of mothers stated that they are working at home, and 19.5 per cent are alternating face-to-face work and working at home. For the lowest income group (12.6 per cent of the sample), their paid work has been face-to-face, which has increased their exposure to contamination. They are also facing difficulties in organizing domestic routines and caring for their children, because daycare centres and schools

remain closed and children are at home. These results confirm the inequalities facing Brazilian mothers.

**Table 2. Paid Work during the Pandemic**

Working at home	47.3%
Working at home and face to face	19.5%
Face to face	12.6%
Stopped working or studying because of the pandemic	9.6%
Did not work or study before the pandemic	11%

Source: Authors 2020

### *Pandemic, Family Income Reduction, and Maternal Unemployment*

In our quantitative field study, 9.6 per cent of the sample were mothers who lost their jobs or stopped working because of the pandemic. Moreover, 30.1 per cent of the sample reported a small reduction in family income, while 24.1 per cent had a significant reduction in income and 8.1 per cent expected income to decrease at the time of the questionnaire.

**Table 3. Family Income during the Pandemic**

Remained the same	33.1%
Small reduction	30.1%
Significant reduction	24.1%
Expected income to decrease	8.1%
Increase in income	2.1%
Total loss of income	1.8%
Other	0.7%

Source: Authors 2020

### *Pandemic, Household Chores Overload, and Changes in Family Routines*

The pandemic has caused changes in the routines of all family members. However, the accumulation of household chores and the restructuring of new family routines have disproportionately fallen on women. Only 43.3 per cent of the interviewees have counted on the participation of fathers or another mother in childcare (table 2).

**Table 4. Childcare during the Pandemic**

Participation of the child’s father or another mother	43.3%
Shared care, but the mother is primary carer	31.4%
Sole carer	20.1%
Participation of other family members (grandparents, in-laws, aunts, and uncles)	19.9%
Help from a nanny or maid	11.9%
Help from older siblings	7.5%

Source: Authors 2020

***Key Challenges and Difficulties of Being a Mother during the COVID-19 Pandemic***

Taking care of children is important, but this is not the only task that demands time from mothers. For this reason, we seek to understand the greatest challenges and difficulties facing the participants regarding mothering in the pandemic.

Considering the key challenges and difficulties of being a mother during the pandemic, 53.6 per cent of the interviewees declared that they feel overwhelmed by the accumulation of domestic and maternal tasks, whereas 50.9 per cent said they do not have time to be alone or take care of themselves, complaining about the lack of privacy and self-care.

**Table 5. Key Challenges and Difficulties of Being a Mother during the Pandemic (Multiple Choice)**

My child misses interacting with other children/ teenagers	56.4%
I feel overwhelmed by domestic tasks and mothering	53.6%
I do not have time to take care of myself or be alone	50.9%
My child feels bored or saddened by not being able to go out	44.6%
I feel guilty for not being able to give enough attention to my child	34.6%
I cannot satisfactorily reconcile work and motherhood	34.0%
I regret that friends and family cannot visit my newborn child	25.4%
The intense and constant relationship with my family has been stressful	23.7%
I cannot keep up with my child’s schoolwork	12.7%

Source: Authors 2020

The responses demonstrate that child-centered thoughts and concerns predominate. The answer most cited by the sample (56.4 per cent) specifically highlights the mothers' difficulty in dealing with children who miss interacting with their peers. Additionally, for 44.6 per cent of the interviewees, social isolation has caused sadness or boredom in children because they must stay at home.

In addition, mothers are worried about how the children are handling the pandemic. Maternal guilt also emerged; 34.6 per cent of women declared that they feel guilty about not having enough time to care for their children.

### *Positive Aspects and Key Learning from the Pandemic Experience*

Regarding positive aspects and the learning acquired during pandemic experiences, 55 per cent of the sample said that they can now spend more time with their children and monitor their development more closely during social isolation. In this context, appreciating spending more time together was cited by 45 per cent of mothers, and the monitoring of children's school activities was highlighted as a benefit by 26 per cent.

Time management was a core issue cited by the mothers. After all, the challenge of juggling different domestic, maternal, professional, and personal demands as well as setting priorities, managing routines, practical activities, and emotional issues are intertwined with expectations, social roles, and maternal conflicts.

### *First Images, Words, and Feelings When Thinking about Being a Mother in the Pandemic*

The pandemic has intensified family life and compressed maternal time, as mothers' individual activities have become intertwined in family routines. The difficulty in dealing with the new family demands is evident in the answers to the following question: What are the first images, words, and feelings that come to mind when you think about what it is like to be a mother in the pandemic? Their answers included tiredness, fear, home, patience, routine, pandemic, love, chaos, daughter, baby, closer, gratitude, and husband. These are the words that synthesize the thoughts, sensations, feelings, and images of Brazilian mothers during the pandemic.

### **Academic Mothers' Pandemic Journeys**

Here, we report key findings obtained from the three mothers involved in academia, who work or study remotely in different Brazilian cities. We use pseudonyms for all the interviewees and their family members and describe the most relevant aspects of their pandemic journeys.

The first interviewee is Juliana, who is thirty-four years old. She is a white, heterosexual woman. She is married and lives in Brasília, the capital of Brazil.

She is a history teacher at a public school and a PhD student in education at the University of Brasília. On the day of our interview, Juliana was in the thirty-second week of pregnancy. She said she actively participates in the education and maternal care of her stepson, Tomás, who is eleven years old. Juliana said that being pregnant during the pandemic evokes an ambiguous feeling. On the one hand, she discussed how she misses her students, friends, and colleagues due to social isolation and laments the fact cannot share her pregnancy with them. As she said, “The pregnancy is a moment to celebrate with our friends, but I have not had that.” On the other hand, she noted how privileged she was to have her husband presence twenty-four hours a day, as he is working from home.

According to Juliana, the pandemic has transformed her family relationship into a closer, more intense, and affective one. Juliana and her husband share custody of her stepson with the child’s mother. Due to the pandemic, she has become more involved with the boy and now helps him with his school activities. In this sense, her experience as a schoolteacher has aided her stepson’s new routine:

I was used to studying at home. With the pandemic, Tomás and my PhD, the tension between the two has become stronger.... Teachers think homeschooling is easy: you send activities, the child opens them, and understands Google Class.... They assume the child will be able to search and know what to type on the keyboard.... Tomás did not know what to type in Word. So, with the baby in my womb, I have been trying to be patient and help him.... At first, we argued a lot... He had two houses, but now he was staying fulltime with us.... But I’m a teacher, and I have four hundred students a year. So, when he lied to me, I said, “You are lying,” then he cried. It was exhausting. The pandemic showed problems he used to hide before, while living both with us and at his mother’s home.

The second interviewee is Luciana, who is Black, lesbian, married, and a mother. She lives in São Paulo, the most populous city in Brazil. She is a journalist and professor of marketing at a private university. She is the mother of Aline, a six-year-old child who was conceived by Luciana’s wife through artificial insemination. The pregnancy was planned by Luciana and her spouse. Motherhood brought them feelings of care, preservation, and the pleasure of participating in their daughter’s development. Luciana said the pandemic has intensified intimacy with her daughter. During social isolation, the interviewee and her daughter have been together twenty-four hours a day. Thus, she felt more present as a mother because she plays, feeds, and stays with her daughter at bedtime. She has easily adapted to working at home because she already had good technology skills, which helped her with her academic work. However,

her main challenge was to be tolerant and patient to help her daughter's daily online school activities while doing her teaching activities at the university simultaneously. She shared the following: "Yes, I must stay with her! She feels insecure to give wrong answers to the teacher. So, I have to be next to her. While doing my job, I keep looking at her books, paying attention to what the teacher is doing ... helping Aline to show her drawing.... So, every Monday my school routine starts at 1:30 p.m. and ends at 5:00 p.m."

Luciana is spending more time working at home, whereas her wife is still working outside the home. But Luciana emphasized that even though she is at home, it does not mean she is free: "Working at home is really challenging, and this is a complicating factor in a relationship, especially when only one person works outside."

Because Luciana is a journalist, she criticized the information overload and its potential consequences: "It is a feeling of fear, right? But fear with hope because I am a mother. That's it for me. The fear of having too much access to information knocks on my door, [yet] my philosophy of life is not to be afraid. On the contrary, I have hope. So, I move on safely, thinking about hope and wishing that everything will be alright soon."

Renata is the third interviewee. She is a postdoctoral researcher, white, and the thirty-seven-year-old mother of two daughters (four and one); she is also married to the children's father. She lives with her family in Florianopolis, in southern Brazil. Her husband works outside the home, whereas she stays at home to care for their two children. For Renata, it has been difficult to manage time and several demands from her daughters, home and work:

The demands seem to have grown; I have to be a mother, a teacher, a psychologist, a cleaner, a driver, a telephone operator, so I almost have no time to work on my demands! I am the mother of two young children, who are at home all the time. They demand a lot of attention and company. Sometimes, they play alone, but they still don't eat alone.... So, I'm always preparing, serving, cleaning, helping, right?

In Renata's words, being a mother before the pandemic was "challenging but rewarding" while being a mother during the pandemic has been "maddening." After the pandemic, she hopes that being a mother will be "liberating." In fact, the difficulty of handling multiple demands is more complicated because the children want things instantaneously: "Their time is urgent! They always say 'I'm hungry now ... I need it now!' So, I need to manage their demands for sleep, snacks, class, baths. So, the biggest challenge is having time to do things for myself.... I have to take care of my personal and professional agenda, so I work while the girls sleep." Renata is exhausted; however, she tries to deal with professional demands objectively, giving priority to the most urgent and important tasks. She cited the number of online events that have arisen during

the pandemic, saying it has been impossible to keep up with them while taking care of the children at home with schools closed.

Renata is concerned about the pandemic's effect on her children into the future. She mentioned how the intense use of computer screens, cell phones, or other media may harm children as well as the effects social distancing. In this sense, she said children may become more introverted and less sociable after the pandemic, and she felt that her daughters are already afraid of going out due to the coronavirus: "Girls let us go to the garden?' 'No, not today, mom. I want to stay inside... the virus is out there, right, mom?'"

Renata associates the current feeling with a moment of struggle for survival because she needs to learn to deal quickly with the pandemic and make life work:

I feel like I have jumped out of an airplane, without having a parachute. You know? What about it now? How am I going to learn to fly? I must fly, but I don't know how to fly! This is how I feel.... No one was prepared for it, but now we have to make it work, you know? Nothing will come out perfect ... but in the end of the day, we must be alive, with our feet on the ground and survive!

### *The Brazilian Blindness*

In the novel *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (*Blindness*), the Portuguese writer José Saramago tells the fictional story of a white blindness that suddenly spreads and uncontrollably transforms all characters, except one woman, into blind people. During the last nine months, the similarities of our daily lives in the pandemic with Saramago's novel are numerous. He writes that as long as the causes, treatment, or vaccine for the sudden white blindness were not discovered, all blind people and those who had physical contact or direct proximity with the illness must be isolated to avoid further contamination; otherwise, the blindness would spread (Saramago 45).

Since March 2020, many Brazilians have made several efforts to decipher what is happening through their cell phone, computer, or television. The invisibility of the virus is, in fact, the greatest discomfort, creating anxiety about what is actually contaminated. Before the pandemic, the social imaginary was of huge monsters, exhibited on the big screens of the movie theaters, where we cannot go anymore. But now, we see little green or red droplets in graphic animations that didactically explain how the coronavirus spreads through the droplets produced through sneezing or breathing. We could never have imagined that arriving home with the grocery shopping would become such a difficult activity. While we spray alcohol gel on our hands, we think of the contrasts between the inside and outside of our home, between cleanliness and dirtiness, between safe and contaminated spaces, and

between public and private spheres. Then we take off our shoes, dip fruits and vegetables into bleach buckets, and after that, we finally shower.

Despite the information overload, there are many people wishing that everything would return to normal as soon as possible. However, it is necessary to remember that the word normal originates from Latin—“normalis,” which means according to the rules. In other words, “normal” means something regular, usual, and socially accepted—something which follows established cultural standards. Does it, therefore, make sense to think of a “new normal” in pandemic times? In our perception, there is, at this moment, an inversion because the opposite of what would be normal is ruling Brazil. At the same time, entrepreneurs and many citizens are putting pressure on the government (at the federal, provincial, and city levels) affected by a metaphorical blindness but with extra cruelty and irrationality, arguing that everything needs to immediately return to “normal,” ignoring the pandemic.

What can we do to face such stupidity? Incoherent measures have been taken by the government. What we are experiencing can be anything but normal. In 1967, Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore stated that “All media work us over completely” (26) in “personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social” dimensions (26). Thus, the information overload of news and media images about the pandemic has been shaping us daily since February with worrying messages about the COVID-19. Besides that, the disastrous performance of the Brazilian federal government has polarized public opinion, as has an overwhelming amount of misinformation.

Brazil has continental dimensions and many resources. Although it represents one of the world’s largest economies, it is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Such inequalities reinforce general misinformation and contribute to social vulnerability. Therefore, any promise of return to normality in the present context would certainly be another harmful illusion.

### ***Being an Academic and a Mother during the Pandemic***

The Brazilian academic environment adopts quantitative parameters of academic productivity, thus following the dominant culture in many Northern hemisphere countries (O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*). The demand for productivity disregards the effects of motherhood on an academic career by maintaining high productivity requirements, which are quantitatively measurable in the selection processes and funding offers.

Since 2015, the Brazilian movement Parent in Science has been collecting data and demanding more equal conditions for mothers (and fathers) in the academic environment. Its participants propose specific actions for funding agencies and demand that universities consider the consequences and effects of maternal work on the productivity of mothers (and fathers), especially in

early childhood. According to a survey carried out by Parent in Science from April to May 2020 with about fifteen thousand Brazilian scientists, including graduate students and professors, the pandemic has reduced the progress of scientific research and decreased the number of article submissions. Compared to other segments of researchers, working at home has particularly reduced the productivity of female scientists who are mothers of young children.

Parent in Science data show that gender inequality is notable in explaining the falling productivity of academic mothers during the pandemic. Only 4.1 per cent of Brazilian mothers who teach at universities can work remotely. This percentage increases to 18.4 per cent among Brazilian women without children. However, 14.9 per cent of Brazilian men with children have managed to maintain their work routine during the pandemic, compared with 25.6 per cent of Brazilian men without children, who have not had their productivity affected due to the pandemic. The situation is even more unequal among Brazilian graduate students. Whereas 11 per cent of women with children have managed to maintain their research routine during the pandemic, 41.1 per cent of men without children have maintained their research routine while working from home.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the difficulties, challenges, and positive aspects have been experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results from Brazil are consistent with the global picture of mothering in the pandemic. Yet Brazil has two variables that exacerbate the gravity of the situation: the federal government's attitude of denial and its politics of undermining science, academic research, and Brazilian intellectuals in general. Both quantitative and qualitative data illustrate the magnitude of the pandemic's effect on the daily lives of Brazilian mothers in general and academic mothers in particular because we—students, professors and researchers—believe in scientific evidence, and fight against social inequalities.

Many Brazilian mothers have remained isolated in their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are dealing with their maternal roles individually and privately, while following most of the ten assumptions of patriarchal motherhood as defined by O'Reilly (*Matricentric Feminism*): essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticalization of motherhood. We need to explore new connections between motherhood and academic work in Brazil and develop creative and collaborative skills. In this context, we position ourselves as Brazilian mothers and academic researchers, affiliated to federal—and publicly funded—Brazilian universities, whose national importance needs international support at this critical moment.

Some Brazilian academic mothers have been gathering on social media and research networks to discuss the pandemic's consequences on their careers to ensure the inclusion, permanence, and progress of mothers in university jobs. The following initiatives give us hope: Parent in Science, Mamães na Pós-Graduação, MãEstudantes UFSC, Coletivo Mães estudantes UFPB, Maternâncias Plurais UFBA, Coletivo Mães da UFF, Núcleo Interseccional em Estudos da Maternidade (NIEM UFF), and GT Maternidades Cientistas e Maternidades Plurais.

Brazilian mothers need to mother their children with media literacy to develop a critical understanding of media content because it is crucial to fight against COVID-19 misinformation especially in Brazil—a country with low levels of education and political consciousness among many citizens. We hope that a significant portion of the Brazilian population begins to understand how important our public universities and public health system are during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our scientists are researching future vaccines and treating the COVID-19 patients in university hospitals. Moreover, Brazilian federal and state universities are providing telemedicine services and psychological care for the population, producing statistics, and developing open-source ventilators for patients. They are also creating informative materials concerning hygiene and health to counter the misinformation circulating throughout social media.

We also need to discuss the effects of the pandemic on our academic lives and productive capacity; we must talk about the specific demands facing academic mothers and fathers throughout the pandemic. Academic productivity has decreased, especially among female scientists who have young children. Besides that, our homes have been suddenly transformed into schools, home offices, and virtual meeting rooms. We agree with Aisha S. Ahmad, who asserts that it will be impossible to return to normality as if nothing had happened. According to Ahmad, we will need to gradually and humbly abandon our academic ego in multiple ways. So, we will have to learn how to change the ways we think and see the world to repair reality as if we were in a marathon (Ahmad).

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## Endnotes

1. Most official demographic data from Brazil are available online at the website of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). The main source for this section was the Continuous National Household Survey (Continuous PNAD) available online at IBGE site.
2. IBGE uses the terms “Black (pretos),” “Brown (pardos),” and “White (brancos)” as colour and race markers for the Brazilian population.
3. SUS is the Brazilian national health service.
4. For detailed information regarding communication and political issues involving the COVID-19 crisis and the dissemination of misinformation in Brazil, please consult the following works: Barberia and Gómez; Kalil and Soares; McCoy and Traiano; Pan American Health Organization (PAHO); Philips; Prates and Barbosa; Recuero and Soares; Tavares, Oliveira Júnior, and Magalhães; Zarocostas.

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## Notes on Contributors

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**Salsabel Almanssori** is a doctoral candidate and sessional instructor at the University of Windsor. Her interdisciplinary research is focused on the intersections between teacher education and feminist understandings of gender-based and sexual violence. She is also a registered and practicing Ontario certified teacher and mother.

**Brittany Arthur** serves as an associate professor at the University of Cincinnati in the Division of Experience Based Learning and Career Education. Brittany prides herself on being a participatory action researcher, specifically using a feminist approach to ensure the voices of marginalized populations are heard. Her research focuses on exploring experiences of women engineering students. She is passionate about participatory methods, specifically utilizing these approaches to strengthen the conversation around equity and inclusion.

**Heather K. Olson Beal** is a professor of education studies at Stephen F. Austin State University. She teaches educational foundations, school-family-community engagement, and educational policy, and researches school choice and the experiences of academic mothers. She has three feisty and big-hearted children who guide and shape her scholarship and teaching. She will forever be grateful for the unanticipated time she had with her family when her college student daughters came home to quarantine.

**Lauren E. Burrow** is an associate professor of elementary education. She is a MotherScholar of three and pursues engaged scholarship in her research of best practices in teacher education. Her scholarship focuses on service learning as pedagogy, community-based teacher education, and creative writing as a means to facilitate her growing commitment to addressing social injustices that affect K-12 students.

**Anna S. CohenMiller**, PhD, is an arts-based methodologist who addresses issues of equity and inclusion in higher education. She works in the Graduate School of Education and is Founding Co-Director of The Consortium of Gender Scholars at Nazarbayev University (Kazakhstan). Specializing in gender and motherhood, Dr. CohenMiller is the Founding Editor in Chief of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture & Pedagogy* and regularly collaborates with scholars, international organizations and governmental bodies in Kazakhstan, the US, the UK, Ghana, and Australia.

**Maria Collier de Mendonça** works as a CAPES postdoctoral researcher at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), Brazil. She has a PhD in communications and semiotics, from the Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paulo (PUC-SP). Her dissertation explored Motherhood in Advertising. In 2013, Maria worked as a CAPES visiting researcher at York University, supervised by Andrea O'Reilly. She is currently researching knowledge media, branding, design thinking, applied semiotics, motherhood, and media. She is the mother of one teenager.

**Chrissy Cross** earned a doctorate in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in science and math from Texas Tech University in 2014. Chrissy is an associate professor and the Graduate Program Coordinator for the Secondary Education Program within the Department of Education Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, TX. She is a mother of four kids.

**Milena Freire de Oliveira-Cruz** works as a professor at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), Brazil. She has a PhD in communication (UFSM). Her dissertation explored maternal work and social inequality in advertising. Her research themes regard gender studies, advertising, motherhood, media reception studies, consumer research, class, and gender. She is the mother of two children.

**Fiona Joy Green** is a feminist mother and professor of women's and gender studies at the University of Winnipeg, who believes in the power of revolutionary feminist motherwork. She's interested in the agency of children and mothers, in gender identities, and in the ability of matroreform and feminist motherlines to contribute to feminist parenting, feminist theorizing, and feminist praxis. Fiona's the sole author of *Practicing Feminist Mothering* (ARP, 2011), is the coeditor of three books (with Demeter Press), which address feminist parenting or maternal pedagogies, and is the coauthor of *Family Blog Lines: Tal[k]ing Care*.

**Batsheva (Sheva) Guy** is a participatory action researcher and educator. Her research interests include equity and inclusion in higher education, particularly using feminist participatory methods to promote the retention of women students and faculty in STEM fields through program development. Dr. Guy has recently published articles on such topics as using participatory methods to understand women engineering students' experiences during co-op and exploring the action portion of a feminist participatory action research project.

**Kristen Hicks-Roof**, PhD, RDN, LDN, CLC, FAND, is a nutrition professor at the University of North Florida. Her major research interests are interprofessional collaboration in healthcare and mentoring in dietetics, of which she coordinates several research programs. While being a fulltime academic faculty member, she is also a mom of two beautiful girls.

**Kimberly M. Hillier** is a PhD scholar of motherhood, gender, and educational studies. Her research focused on the experiences of graduate student mothers in higher education within the Southwestern Ontario context. She is also a registered and practicing Ontario certified teacher, a sessional instructor at the University of Windsor, and a mother.

**Tonya D. Jeffery** is a tenure-track assistant professor of science education. Her research focuses on STEM teacher preparation, self-efficacy, and professional development; culturally responsive pedagogy; teaching science through the critical lens of social justice and racial equity; recruitment, retention, and persistence of beginning science teachers; teacher identity, beliefs, and practices; and an evolving focal point on social justice issues at the intersectionality of gender, race, and class, relating to women in academia.

**Alexandra Kisitu** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. She holds an advanced women's studies graduate certificate from the University of Hawaii as well. Her research focuses on healthy lifestyles theory, feminist theory, community birth, midwifery, and obstetric violence.

**Sarah S. LeBlanc**, PhD, University of Missouri, is an assistant professor of interpersonal communication at Purdue University, Fort Wayne. Her research combines health and family communication, specifically looking at maternal health communication. She explores links between supportive communication and postpartum depression. In addition to a few book chapters, LeBlanc's work has appeared in *Death Studies*, *The Journal of Loss and Trauma*, *The Journal of Autoethnography*, *Qualitative Research Reports*, and *Health Communication*.

**Catherine Ma**, MA, MPhil, PhD, is an associate professor of psychology at the City University of New York (CUNY). She has presented and written extensively on the maternal experiences of breastfeeding, mothering challenges in medicine, critiquing the current breastfeeding paradigm, racial bias in youth sports, imposter syndrome, and antiracism pedagogy. Born in Kowloon, Hong Kong, Dr. Ma is also on the board of the Asian American/Asian Research Institute of CUNY and is a mother of three.

**Susan E. Mannon** is an associate professor of sociology at University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. She has published widely on gender, labor and global capitalism. Her book, *City of Flowers: An Ethnography of Social and Economic Change in Costa Rica's Central Valley*, examines work and family life under rapid economic restructuring in Costa Rica. More recently, she has been studying low-income mothers attending college in California's Central Valley.

**Mairi McDermott** is a mother-scholar, assistant professor, and chair in curriculum and learning at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. She researches what kinds of teaching and learning can push us beyond the existing habits, assumptions, and colonial ways of knowing, being, and relating in schools and society.

**Meaghan Brady Nelson**, PhD, is a mother and an artist. She is an assistant professor and program director of fine arts at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. Her research and service center around the ways collaborative artmaking experiences and critical visual literary can inspire social consciousness and social responsibility, along with her multilayered identity of becoming a Mothering-Artademic. She collaboratively created the Kids Arts Festival of TN, which annually serves over five thousand community members, and directed the Unity Flag Project, which works to create purple empathy in American democracy through the visual arts.

**Tracey Norman** is a Toronto-based choreographer, educator, producer, performer, researcher, and mother of two young children. Her choreography has been presented on stages across North America. She holds a MFA in choreography and dramaturgy and has been a contract faculty member in the Department of Dance at York University for a decade. Tracey is current president and resident artist of the Intergalactic Arts Collective (IGAC), an artist-run organization that focuses on research and creation.

**Andrea O'Reilly** is a professor in the School of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at York University, founder/editor-in-chief of the Journal of the Motherhood Initiative, and publisher of Demeter Press. She is co-editor/editor of twenty books, including *Feminist Parenting: Perspectives from Africa and Beyond* and *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood*, and author of three monographs, including *Matricentric Feminism: Theory Activism and Practice*. She is twice the recipient of York University's Professor of the Year Award for teaching excellence and is the 2019 recipient of the Status of Women and Equity Award of Distinction from OCUFA (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations).

**Olga Sanmiguel-Valderrama** is an associate professor in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Cincinnati in the USA. She has published extensively on women's paid and underpaid labour, including on mothering, working women's rights in agribusinesses in Latin America, and on the rights of Latinx immigrants in the USA and Canada. She coedited the volume *Global Women's Work Perspectives on Gender and Work in the Global Economy* (Routledge, 2018). More recently, she coedited the volume *Where Did I Go? Reflections of the So-Called Late Mothering among Professional Women* (Demeter Press, upcoming). Currently, she is working on a monograph comparing immigration and labour regulations governing the racialized and gendered working and living conditions of Latinx agricultural workers across three agribusiness situated in Canada, the USA, and Colombia. The volume is provisionally titled *Latinx in Agribusinesses*. She is also the founder PI of the newly established The Americas, Indigenous, and Latinx Research Center at the University of Cincinnati.

**Casey Schachner** is an assistant professor of 3D fine art at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, and a soon-to-be mother. Her sculptural work ranges from traditional use of stone carving and metalworking to contemporary approaches with site-specific installations and permanent public artworks. Her work often explores themes of materiality, identity, and place. More of her artwork can be found at [caseyschachner.com](http://caseyschachner.com)

**Nathalie Ségeral** is a lecturer in French studies at The University of Sydney. Prior to moving to Australia, she received a PhD from UCLA and held a tenured position at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. Her research revolves around trauma and motherhood in the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and Francophone Oceania. Her work has appeared in *The Journal of Holocaust Research, Jewish Culture and History, Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, and she has co-edited *Trauma and Motherhood in Literature and Culture* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2021).

**Robin Silbergleid** is the author of several books, including the memoir *Texas Girl* (Demeter 2014) and the poetry collection *The Baby Book* (CavanKerry 2015); she is co-editor, with Kristina Quynn, of *Reading and Writing Experimental Texts: Critical Innovations* (Palgrave 2017). She also works with the infertility advocacy, art, oral history, and portraiture project *The ART of Infertility*. Currently, she is an associate professor of English and the director of creative writing at Michigan State University.

**Elizabeth Spradley** (PhD Texas A&M University) is an assistant professor of Communication Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University. Her research focuses on health, gender, narrative, and risk and crisis. She edits for *The Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine* and her works are published in journals like *The Journal of Community Informatics*.

**Poh Tan** is pursuing a second doctorate in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University in the Curriculum Theory and Implementation Program. She obtained her first doctorate in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of British Columbia. Her research in education focuses on understanding and extending the definition of scientific literacy, specifically with concepts of relationality through an Indigenous Hawaiian lens. She is thankful to her two sons, Khafri and Khian, for being part of her personal and professional journey.



